Perception, Poetry, and Purpose: An Autoethnography of a Chronically Ill and Neurodivergent Public Servant

Challenging Accessibility: Lived Narratives of a Neurodivergent Public Servant

Whole World In - Self-Seeded Equity

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Submitted to OCAD University in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Design in Inclusive Design

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Land Acknowledgement

I respectfully acknowledge that I am on the ancestral lands and waters of the Anishinaabe Algonquin territory. I recognize their long-standing relationship with this territory which remains unceded. The peoples of the Anishinaabe Algonquin Nation have been and continue to be the caretakers of this land. I call on all of us to end Indigenous erasure and engage with First Nations, Inuit and Metis people and Indigenous communities outside of Canada in meaningful ways. Many of us are on other lands tonight.

I invite you to check out https://native-land.ca/ and https://talkingtreaties.ca/

In the spirit of ending Indigenous erasure and engaging meaningfully with First Nations, Inuit, Métis, and Indigenous communities globally, I extend a call to all of us, wherever we may stand, to reflect on the ground beneath our feet and the waters that flow around us. Websites like https://native-land.ca/ and https://talkingtreaties.ca/ offer starting points for exploration and engagement, but the journey is far-reaching and deeply personal.

Orality and the power of stories, shared, lived, and experienced inform the backbone of this work. Ange Loft reminds us, “Maps are a colonial tool,” prompting us to question who draws lines, who navigates them, and who tells the stories of place and people. My research is a humble contribution to a larger dialogue, one that honours Indigenous protocols, data sovereignty, and the history of narratives that defy simple categorization.

In sharing this work, I aim to contribute to the ongoing conversations about ethical technology development, the significance of data sovereignty, and the imperative to represent communities and individuals authentically and respectfully. This land acknowledgment is a commitment to a process of continuous learning, listening, and engagement with the stories, past, present, and futures, of the Indigenous lands and peoples with whom we share this world. As I move through life, I carry with me the sense of solidarity, strength, and sovereignty shared by Indigenous communities with me. Hoping that my actions may honour these teachings and contribute to our collective journey towards a greater understanding of justice, and reconciliation.

Maps are a colonial tool – Ange Loft

Media 1- Sovereignty - Memories on Paper

Between data deserts where too many truths hide,
How might we honour every story when the rivers run wide,
We are called to break the silence, to end erasures of times, places, and spaces,
The sky, the water, the land - a testament to care,
Yet the stewards often a mere whisper in the night,
It’s bold - to hear the sounds of mother, of other.
We ask why, why, why?
This was and is yet still a sacred place,
Centuries old in story and way,
Yet the land - it's fought over, fought for, and forgotten all at the same time,
Echo-Hawk's ribbon dress, a symbol of resilience, resistance,
Against the erasure, standing with heavy persistence.
For data's not just numbers, it's memories, lives, a sacred trust,
In our hands, it's up to us to promise it's just.
But remember, as we navigate these colonial tools,
"Maps," Ange Loft whispers, "obey the drawer's rules."
For in orality lies power, history's unbroken thread,
In every spoken word, the living meets the dead.
Data sovereignty, a call for a community archive, for control of our own fate,
To gather, protect, and share what was once something we did celebrate.
We're called to shatter silence, to end Indigenous erasure,
To engage with nations, with respect, beyond mere gesture.
Together, let's weave a future where every voice is heard,
Where stories flourish, undiminished, every word.
In this journey of reconciliation, may my work play a part,
An offering of peace, from my heart.
As Laura Arndt told the world…
We have the truth,
We have the records and the documents,
now we get to decide what healing looks like for us.
Time is not a line in the sand, a new story is unfolding,
Land - it's more than the dirt beneath our feet,
it is vibrant, alive, surrounded by warmth and kinship alike,
Let's us not slip backwards, the fire in our hearts – our motivator for better,
As to gaze at the breath of the forest lifts us upward,
It's harmony, pain, and stars - the spirit it will reside,
As trees root deeper into the ground, soaking up the fruits of the earth,
We belong. Yes, we belong to the land.
There's a tale of belonging, woven with care,
A song of the land, that both settler and Indigenous share.
the land is a kin, a guide,
Belonging comes in steps of solidarity,
In supporting Indigenous rights, in finding justice’s clarity
Together we can acknowledge the stories it has to tell, no matter where we roam.
We are home.

Abstract

This study offers an autoethnographic exploration of what I've experienced while navigating the public service in Canada as a chronically ill, neurodivergent person who worked at the intersection of accessibility, disability rights and service design. The layered complexities over my 15-year public service career allow me to draw on personal narratives, thematic analysis and systemic design to interrogate the emotional, structural and historical barriers faced by persons with disabilities. I explore key experiences - including systemic discrimination, advocacy and burnout, and moments of resilience, as this research seeks to uncover how policy and practice shape identity and agency.

I am seeking to answer the question about how my lived experiences as a chronically ill, neurodivergent public servant has illuminated the systemic failures of trauma-informed care within public service institutions. I unpack my lived experiences and what they reveal about the interplay between trauma, chronic illness, and the capacity for systemic change in the public service. I'm seeking to unlock my experiences in accessibility as a neurodivergent individual with a 15+ year career within the Canadian Federal Government.

I incorporate elements of poetry, prose, metaphor and visuals to provide an evocative lens to examine these dynamics, positioning this study as a call to action for a more equitable public service. I lean into formative life events that shaped my worldview and the dissonance between policies, practices and lived realities. This study offers a critique on the tokenism and optics-driven culture in modern public service, highlighting the emotional labour often carried by people with disabilities. The performative aspects can allow us to uncover opportunities for genuine change. In modern public service, superficial actions and activism are designed to project an image of support without any tangible or meaningful change. This often leads to the perpetuation of systemic equities. These types of tokenistic behaviours aim to use feel good illusions of progress which mask the pervasive challenges faced by people with disabilities.

Throughout my career I have observed many performative practices, often identifying these and challenging their superficial nature geared towards compliance. Even those projects that started with the goal of developing authentic, equity or inclusion driven reforms to address real needs would find themselves being shrivelled down, de-scoped, de-prioritized, and shaped into fuzzy narratives of change and progress. Moving beyond these performative gestures might seem impossible. It requires a commitment to substantive policy changes, deeper accountability, and more voices invited in that are valued, listened to and actioned upon through reciprocal involvement of disabled lives in the decision-making process. By confronting and dismantling performative activism, we may pave the way for a more equitable public service that truly embodies the principles of inclusivity and accessibility.

Who I Am? - I Am Disabled

I am neurodivergent, I have ADHD. I also have an auto-immune disorder and I have low energy due to anaemia from low ferritin. I am a mother of 3. I am a photographer, a writer, and someone who works at the intersection of research and design in relation to equity. I love to garden, bake and watch my tiny humans grow. You can often find me recharging in the garden or in my kayak on the water in the Ottawa River. I am the older sibling to a long time CPP disability recipient who was born with a chromosomal difference that is medically referred to as Turner syndrome. I am the stepdaughter of a man who experienced a life altering injury at work in his late thirties. He was a logger and a carpenter, but could no longer work in that field after losing three of his fingers in an accident. I am the granddaughter of a woman who struggled with dementia and I acted as her part-time caregiver in my teenage years before cancer took her. I am also the daughter of a bipolar schizophrenic man in his 60's who experiences homelessness and chronic under-housing in Toronto. I have been exposed to and lived through disability for all of my life and it's influenced my career decisions, the detours in my route through life and my uncanny passion to spark intentional inclusion of disability communities. For us to be seen as individuals in need of equitable and just tools and opportunities at work and in life. We have valuable contributions and innovations to reshape the discourse and journey in our societies to become enablers both environmentally and culturally.

Many people do not understand ADHD. It impacts my: stress level, ability to focus, disrupts sleep, and hinders relaxation. All of this can and does have an impact on mental health.

- It can take me 20 hours to do 1 hour of work
- If I am hyper-fixated I can do 20 hours of work in an hour

I see connections others may not. I'll zoom in and out at a series of different elements and uncover patterns. That is essentially where I thrive. When rules and norms force me to constrain this, to root my thoughts in others, my disconnect is profound and my creativity is lost.

How some see the world - My brain is broken. I spend my day questioning the status quo and making connections others don't see. It's chaos.

Reframe: My brain is unique. It allows me to thread things together to showcase their interconnectedness of decisions, processes and outcomes. It's complex.

Introduction

I stopped and I started. I wrote 5 papers before I settled on this one. I've done the same in my attempt to write a book. In 2020 I started from the perspective of disabled public servants in Canada, by 2024 I'd experienced many shifts from living through a global pandemic, the freedom convey movement, global political instability, and economic crisis all the while raising three tiny humans[1]. When I take a reflective pause to look at the social, political and cultural landscape of Canada my personal insights on how many larger events have created a ripple-down effect with significant impacts on individual lives and a variety of communities. This has been a difficult space to navigate. Academia is hard.

Research Question - Rooting Personal Narratives in Systemic Critique

Given my focus on my lived experience as a neurodivergent public servant navigating the challenges of accessibility and systemic barriers, my research question tied to the interplay between the personal and the broader cultural and institutional context.

Outline key questions guiding this project

- What do my lived experiences reveal about the interplay between trauma, chronic illness, and the capacity for systemic change in public service?
- What does accessibility mean for neurodivergent individuals in public service?
- How has my lived experience as a chronically ill, neurodivergent public servant illuminated the systemic failures of trauma-informed care within public service institutions?

This question

- Centres my lived experience while connecting it to broader systemic patterns.
- Aligns with autoethnography, which uses personal narratives to explore and critique cultural and systemic phenomena.
- Encourages reflexivity, requiring me to analyze my role, perceptions, and actions within the systems I navigate.

A Pollinators Garden (Not a Literature Review)

A brain like mine struggles to confine itself to work in service of a single question without wanting to bring in context and nuance from the entire system. Changing this

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[1] Tiny humans is the loving reference I use when talking about my children.

has been a focus of mine for the last year, I still revert back often, I see everything as a constellation. This is a pattern for me. It's a curious one, but incredibly frustrating at the same time. I see this as an academic failure, but it made my knowledge across systems much more vast and filled with diverse perspectives. I sought out papers, pod costs, journals, books, and other content from a large swatch of under-invested and historically and structurally marginalized communities. This continues to reshape my worldview every day. I developed habits of reading papers, listening to conference talks, and reading blogs, and social media posts as part of my daily prep activities. I see this as compounding my growth over the last few years. Trade-offs can go both ways.

By 2022 I was disillusioned with the role of being a public servant. My mission-driven principles felt compromised beyond repair. We had a leader of our country who was and still is experiencing mass division, including fractures within their own party. There is a significant risk for re-election, no other candidate is currently emergent, platformed etc. A leader of the opposition who refuses security clearance so he doesn't have to be held accountable, who sows division and has a track record for voting for things that would seek to take away human rights. I live rurally. I hear and see the division every day. I'm only an hour outside of Ottawa. Democracy needs us to show up right now. Where I live was home to a very strong Freedom Convoy movement. My child was bullied at school for having a "liberal b*tch" mother. I was very involved in the pandemic response with accessibility and open about the efforts I was involved with. The humans working on the services experienced a deep burnout in many spaces, sectors and environments.

Inaccessible public service systems often fail to account for the complexity and intersecting experiences of neurodivergent people, perpetuating exclusion through rigid, compliance-driven frameworks (Dolmage, 2017). This review explores the intersection of autoethnography, poetic inquiry, personal reflection, and systemic critique from the lens of a neurodivergent, chronically ill public servant who opted to leave the chains and “golden handcuffs” behind.

While legislation like the Accessible Canada Act has sought to improve workplace accessibility, these frameworks remain largely reactive, requiring people like myself to adapt to rigid institutional norms that can cause significant cumulative harm. In response to these barriers, autoethnography, according to Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011), can provide a means to connect personal experiences with systemic critiques. This allows for making visible what is often left unseen between emotional and cognitive toll of navigating inaccessible systems.

Autoethnography provides a method for connecting personal narratives to systemic critiques, but it often relies on traditional narrative forms. Poetic inquiry (Hanauer, 2010), however, offers an evocative and multimodal lens to explore the emotional and sensory dimensions of these experiences, capturing nuances that may be lost in conventional prose. As I draw on intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), accessibility research (Dolmage, 2017) and critiques of resilience narratives (Ahmed, 2017), this review positions this study as a multimodal exploration of personal narratives and the need for systemic reform.

By synthesizing these works, this study addresses gaps in accessibility research and advocates for a reimagining of institutional systems through the lens of lived experience. I have applied a feminist disability justice lens to illuminate these systemic barriers and propose pathways toward more inclusive policies and opportunities to operationalize them within the public service. This work is grounded in my personal lived experience over 15 years as a public servant and advocate that seeks to reimagine accessible futures that prioritize a relational, human-focused workforce.

The clarity of the resilience narrative is relevant as it reflects the emotional burden of resilience narratives imposed on marginalized individuals. It is a powerful critique of the cost that comes with institutional demands seeking personal endurance rather than owning the lack of systemic change.

Media 2 - Resilience

They call it strength,
As a weightless heart grows heavy,
when the load crumbles on your shoulders,
the ability to keep going,
to endure the cracks in the system.

But resilience is not a gift.
no light to shine your way to a safety net,
It is the weight I carry,
the burden of bending myself
remember never to forget,
a lesson you should learn,
a theory you should never let burn,
to fit a world not built for me.
be whom you have created yourself to be,
They applaud my survival,
but I ask,

Why must I keep surviving
when the system should change?
don’t live in a fantasy,
dreams will fuel your passion,
but time will see your life unfold,
tell me a story I haven't been told,
open my eyes to a new day,
help me find a way - to rid myself of this distraction,
you are the centre of my isolation,
and as the rain falls around me,
I've come to realize the only person who can set me free...
is me.

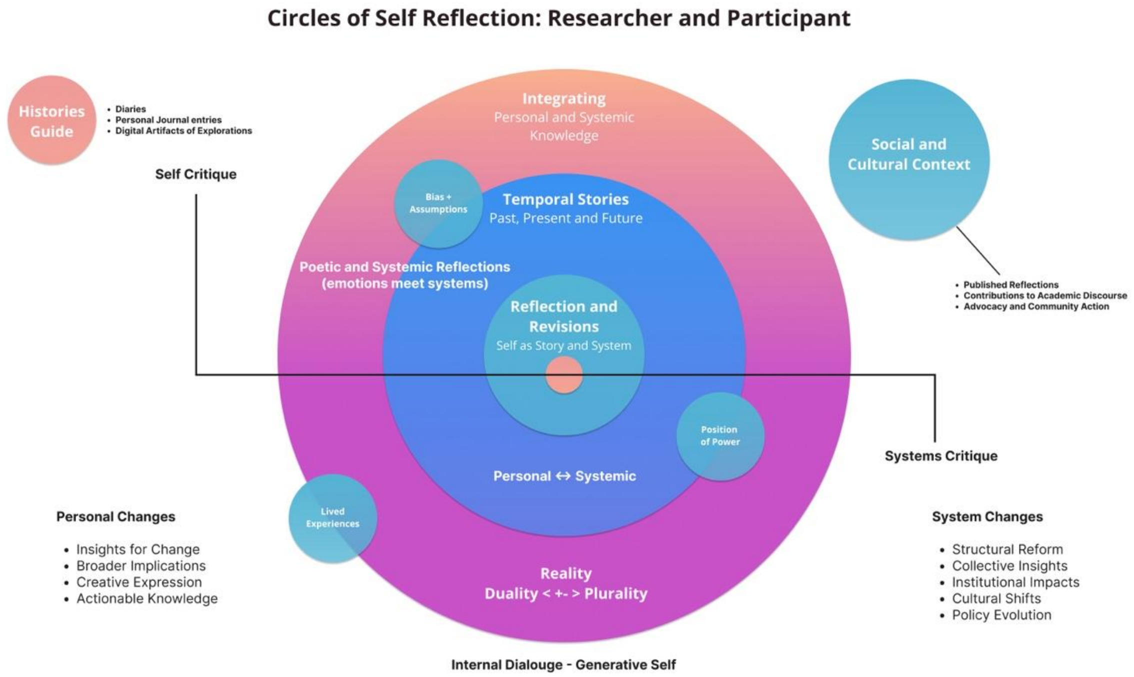
When I left the public service it wasn’t a rejection of government work or the needs that people have for the public service. I am still mission driven, but it was a necessity for my survival. It was an discovery that I need to shift the soil that was beneath my feet. The rigid systems that demanded resilience without offering support had eroded my sense of self. I sought a new space where I could be seen not just as a “problem to solve” but as a valuable contributor to shaping equitable futures.

Methodology: Cultivating a Narrative Garden through Evocative Autoethnography

In this work, I employ an evocative autoethnographic approach, grounded in the metaphorical framework of forests, gardens, and pollinators as storytellers. This multimodal methodology integrates autoethnography, feminist disability studies, and poetic inquiry to explore my lived experience as a chronically ill, neurodivergent woman navigating the federal public service in Canada. The forest represents the systemic shadows, the garden symbolizes personal growth, and the pollinator embodies interconnected change-making. This metaphorical framing aligns with the relational, nonlinear nature of my narrative, offering a creative yet rigorous way to critique institutional systems. An autoethnographic approach has allowed me to lay bare my lived experiences in their messy, raw and complicated form. With the aim of connecting them to the larger systemic forces that were and continue to be at play.

Key Methodological Elements

- **Personal Narratives:** Drawing from my experiences as a public servant, mother, and advocate.
- **Poetic Inquiry:** Using poetry to distil emotional truths and systemic reflections.
- **Systemic Critique:** Analyzing the disconnect between policy intentions and lived realities.



Media 3: Circles of Self Reflection, Researcher and Participant

This graphic is a representation of my process, where I use my histories as a guide to better understanding the plurality that we find in our realities.

I use autoethnography to serve as both the roots and the soil structure of this work, as a way to dig deep into personal narratives and unearth their connections to larger systemic forces. The forest floor represents the foundational layers of my experiences, enriched by stories, memories, and reflections. I deployed an evocative style with the aim of inviting readers into the intimate, vulnerable and emotional exploration of my story. This often may relate to how people with ADHD may consider themselves to be “overshares”. I know I certainly have felt that many times in my life. I hope that this will allow for a deeper understanding of the barriers and opportunities with the public service and our social systems at large. I have found that it let me reflect not only on what I have experienced in my life but how I made sense of it, how those moments shaped me and how they reflect the broader truths about what it means to work in the public service as a chronically ill, neurodivergent woman without safety nets or support structures. Much like how the floor of the forest is home to decomposing organic matter that nourishes new growth, this methodology embraces the messy, raw, and fragmented nature of lived experiences to generate meaningful insights.

This is not a thesis that promises a tidy conclusion or universal truth. I am not claiming that my story speaks for everyone. It doesn’t. What it does, I hope, is stretch the boundaries of what we consider valid knowledge and challenge the ways we design and engage with public service systems. By chronicling my story, I aim to provoke thought, not provide easy answers. The choice of this methodology reflects my lived experience as someone with ADHD, where meaning-making is dynamic and nonlinear. This framework values the iterative and relational processes of reflecting on personal narratives and situating them within broader cultural, systemic, and institutional contexts. Like saplings bending in the wind, my narrative captures the unpredictable and nonlinear nature of my journey through systemic barriers, revealing how seemingly isolated moments connect to broader cultural, institutional, and policy frameworks.

This framework reflects my lived experience as someone with ADHD, where meaning-making is dynamic and nonlinear. As Armstrong (2010) notes, neurodivergent individuals often possess unique cognitive strengths, including pattern recognition and nonlinear thinking, which make traditional, linear research methodologies less fitting. My narrative captures these nonlinear processes, revealing how personal reflections intertwine with systemic critique to challenge the boundaries of conventional knowledge production.

This work is deeply personal, yet it is situated within the larger framework of systemic critique. My methodology is rooted in:

- **Evocative Autoethnography**: A qualitative approach that uses personal narrative to explore and critique cultural and systemic phenomena.
- **Feminist and Disability Studies**: As an applied frameworks that emphasize intersectionality, lived experience, and the critique of power structures.
- **Poetic Inquiry**: As both a method and a product that values the aesthetic and emotional dimensions of research, using poetry to convey depth and nuance.

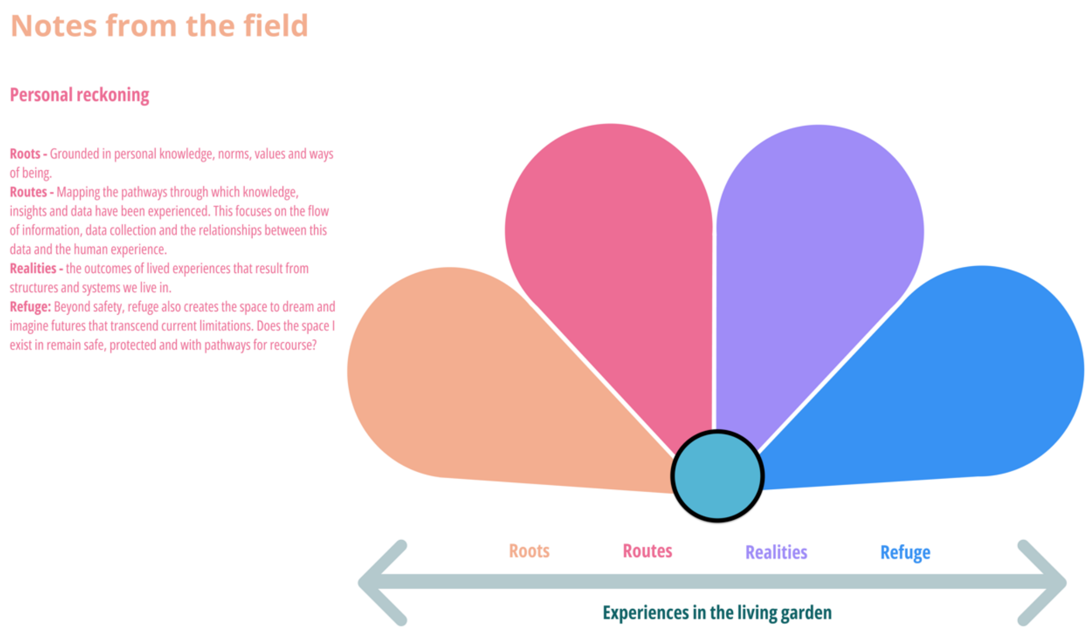
This methodology reflects my lived experience as a neurodivergent person, where sensemaking is often nonlinear, relational, and deeply reflective. Donald Schön's work suggests that reflective practice is widely used in professional fields such as education, healthcare, and social work. It involves systematically thinking about one's actions and experiences to improve understanding and practice, Schon, (1983).

- **Stories and memories:** Personal narratives are the seeds from which this work grows. Moments where I was pushed to my limits or discovered unexpected strength. They're not polished; they're real captures of me simply existing in this world.
- **Fieldnotes and observations**: The things I saw, heard, and felt during my years in the public service. These may appear sharp, emotionally ladened and sometimes chaotic.

- **Diaries and personal writings**: The private moments I captured when I thought no one was looking. The raw edges of emotion and exhaustion.
- **Blog posts, tweets, and public musings**: Snapshots of my voice evolving over time as I fought for accessibility, inclusion, and equity.
- **Poetry and artwork**: Because some things can’t be expressed any other way. They carry the weight of emotion and symbolism in ways that prose sometimes cannot.

I have approached this as a multimodal project. The premise is to pollinate these ideas and thoughts across modes.

Media 3 - Notes from the field



Notes from the field

Personal reckoning

Roots - Grounded in personal knowledge, norms, values and ways of being.
Routes - Mapping the pathways through which knowledge, insights and data have been experienced. This focuses on the flow of information, data collection and the relationships between this data and the human experience.
Realities - the outcomes of lived experiences that result from structures and systems we live in.
Refuge: Beyond safety, refuge also creates the space to dream and imagine futures that transcend current limitations. Does the space I exist in remain safe, protected and with pathways for recourse?

I hold myself accountable to the experiences in the living garden. It has led to a personal reckoning and a framework that guides many aspects of how I explore the world. In this framework for my notes from the field I consider the roots, routes, realities and need for refuge as core elements to exploring the self.

You'll find me listening to papers, posts, and information using assistive technologies like read aloud software's, screen readers and other tools that are shared in audio formats. Multimodal artifacts and visuals underscore the creative, relational, and nonlinear nature of this work, reflecting my neurodivergent way of processing and communicating knowledge. There is an overlap between feminism and disability justice, it is most visible to me it it's shared commitment to challenging systems of oppression, centring structurally and historically underinvested voices, and advocating for systemic change. I believe that both of these frameworks emphasize intersectionality and recognize that lived experiences are shaped by overlapping identities, perceptions, worldviews and experiences.

Let's be honest about what this is and take this as your disclaimer as you read the body of this work. This isn't the kind of academic work that ties everything up neatly with a bow. It doesn't have all the answers. It's deeply personal, unapologetically reflective, and it asks more questions than it answers. If you're looking for generalizability, you won't find it here. What you will find is a call to action, a different way of seeing and thinking. An expansive view if you will that might push the boundaries of what you perceive to be the norms in which we live in.

This work is an offering: my story, my truths, and my reflections on how systems, well-meaning or not often fail people like me. It’s about how we can rethink what we take for granted, challenge the things we’ve normalized, and imagine what it might look like to truly build systems that honour the richness of our differences. This work is situated in my interpretations and perspectives and understandings of context, time and space. The value of this work lies in its capacity to provoke thoughts, challenge norms and inspire new ways of understanding systemic inequities, inclusive design and the role of equity in our lives.

Why Autoethnography?

I find that autoethnography as a qualitative research method allows me to best explore the intertwined elements of my own personal experiences within the cultural contexts that I find myself in. Given many of the concepts I am exploring are complex, nuanced experiences it enables me to unearth those layers, to expose the systemic roots of my personal challenges as a neurodivergent and chronically ill public servant. I find myself agreeing strongly with (Hanauer, 2021) who argues that these subjective experiences can offer essential insight into broader systemic structures, and the cultural dynamics that frame them.

My choice of evocative autoethnography is deeply personal yet inherently systemic. I am employing an approach rooted in metaphors of nature such as forests and gardens. This is where I feel most grounded. I am hoping to help others by encouraging them to plant their own stories as seeds for systemic change. Like a forest, my story is not isolated, its root systems run deep and wide, branching out into broader societal structures, shaped by the policies, people, and practices that surrounded me. This work matters because I’ve lived it. It matters to the little girl I once was and the woman I have become because of those very experiences. My story is not just my own; it is tangled in the roots of the systems I’ve navigated and the landscapes they’ve created.

Pollination of Ideas: From Personal Struggle to Systemic Critique

The forced disclosures, the inadequate accommodations, they’re not just my struggles. They’re a reflection of deeper, systemic flaws in how government institutions approach accessibility for neurodivergent employees. Sharing these stories feels like scattering seeds in a wildflower garden full of native plants, each one carrying the potential to take root elsewhere, sparking critique and inspiring the kind of institutional change we desperately need.

- **Forced disclosure**: Revealing my neurodivergence multiple times highlights the dehumanization embedded in hierarchical systems.
- **Disability passport advocacy**: Piloting a tool meant to simplify accommodations revealed gaps in its design and implementation, reflecting broader inefficiencies in accessibility policies.

My reflections on navigating bureaucracy highlight how neurodivergent individuals are often required to “justify” their needs, a practice that reinforces ableism in public institutions. Sharing my story of piloting the disability passport connects individual advocacy to broader gaps in organizational policies. My analysis of being asked to disclose my disability to multiple people can expose the systemic dehumanization of neurodivergent employees in hierarchical institutions. Autoethnography is particularly effective for critiquing power dynamics and institutional practices. It allows me to use my story to highlight how systems can marginalize, exclude, or hinder certain groups. The use of poetic language to describe my frustration juxtaposed with an analytical breakdown of policy inefficiencies offers a powerful dual perspective. Autoethnography allows us to document our personal growth and transformation while tying it to systemic change. My journey from idealistic entry into public service to eventual departure provides insights into how systemic barriers shape individual trajectories and the loss of potential for institutions when they fail to support diverse employees.

Poetry is the pollen in this ecosystem, an art form that distils complex emotions, contradictions, and vulnerabilities into something raw and resonant Poetry is a medium that allows me to express what may feel unspeakable. It allows me to distil my complex emotions, contradictions and vulnerabilities into something raw, resonant and visceral. For someone like me navigating the world often feels fragmented and overwhelming, poetry provides a structure to that chaos. It also can serve as a way to access emotions and memories that are difficult to articulate.

In the content of this autoethnography, poetry offers me an outlet and possibly a transformative lens to expose personal experience as a means of collective understanding. In his book *Poetry as Research: Exploring Second Language Poetry Writing*, Hanauer notes that poetry is a legitimate research method. Indicating that it is particularly valuable for exploring subjective experiences. He emphasizes that poetry provides a condensed, emotive, and precise form of expression. It has the capacity to capture lived realities in ways traditional prose cannot, (Hanauer, 2021). Poetry transcends the barriers of traditional academic writing by making space for emotional truth, ambiguity, and layered meaning. Can you feel with me for a moment. You don’t have to understand everything. It is okay to just be.

Poems anchor this research in lived experience, while also creating moments of pause and reflection for the reader. They allow for intimacy and resonance, reminding us that data isn't just numbers or narratives. it's also the heartbeat of a lived life. Poetic autoethnography combines poetic inquiry with autoethnographic methods, using poetry to explore and represent personal experiences. This approach emphasizes the aesthetic and emotional dimensions of research, providing a powerful means to convey the depth of lived experiences. (Hanauer, 2021)**.** For me, poetry is not just a method of expression. It’s a way of making sense of the world, distilling complex emotions and experiences into something tangible.

Take the poem *"Up to Me"* as an example. Written in my late teens, it reflects the weight of systemic exclusion and personal turmoil. Lines like:

No success when your life's a living mess.
I want to be done ripping myself off,
I want to push through.

This captures the emotional toll of navigating systems that perpetuate failure.

Ethical Considerations

This work inevitably includes other people, directly or indirectly, and my perspective on shared events may not align with theirs. This can raise ethical concerns around representation. I have reflected on your ethical responsibility in representing others. I have avoided naming or identifying individuals and emphasize that my account is based on my perspective.

Ethical considerations are central to this autoethnographic work. As Ellis (2007) notes, autoethnographers need to be careful when navigating the tension between personal vulnerability and ethical responsibility. With this awareness I have approached this project understanding the potential risks of self-disclosure, balancing openness with self-preservation. By incorporating multimodal elements, I aim to make this work more accessible, recognizing that traditional academic formats can be exclusionary (Costanza-Chock, 2020).

I am seeking to create space for readers to engage with this work on their own terms. The value of this approach lies in its ability to make the personal political, to use the evocative power of storytelling and poetry to challenge systemic inequities and to reimagine what academic research can look like.

The Power of Poetry

Its power lies in its honesty and the way it encapsulates the intersections of personal struggle and systemic erasure. While it may stand on its own, integrating it into the narrative with reflections and thematic connections will amplify its impact. Poetry like this doesn't just tell a story, it invites the reader into my emotional state and systemic critique.

Media 3 - Up to me... 2006

No longer steady.
No light to help me see my way.
The paths are marred by twists and turns
Uneven.
No goodness is left inside me.
No truth to be found when walking upon this horrid ground.
Alone I creep inside my mind,
Undone by the pain that I find,
Cries day and night,
Screams echoing for their escape,
But no sound do they make.

Helpless as a life preserver unused,
More broken than a child abused,
Wondering when the hands on the clock will stop turning,
For this heart to stop yearning.
No concentration,
No order in a place like this.
No room for forgiveness.

Can't see past myself.
Can't see tomorrow.
Wallowing in yesterday.
No success when your life's a living mess.
I want to be done ripping myself off,
I want to push though.
I need to learn to live,
I'm done waiting my turn.
At the bottom of my own pile,
Anxious, nothing seems worthwhile,

But tomorrow I'll be left alone because of my own choices,
Nothing is more astute than the bigger picture.
My very one fairy tale.
Pain everywhere you turn,
Behind my eyes, I feel the burn,
In my heart, I feel the breaking,
My lungs shaking.
I can't even read my own mind.
No straight and narrow,
although I might long for it,
On days like this.

When I can see clearly the choices I've made,
And the bed I'm lying in.
Self-loathing is my biggest sin.
Kin alike know not that it's me,
That's capitulated in this place,
Could never finish school,
Could never keep a job,
Could cut ties with anyone,
Didn't matter what the load was,
There was no line to step out of,
I made my own rules,
And broken them whenever it fit.
Now I have a job,
But I want to quit everyday,
Just another sign of my mindless motions.
For tomorrow I'll be praying on a shooting star,
For a quick fix,
a job to pay the bills,
Maybe a lotto win,

Anything but sitting on the edge of the seat,
Waiting for the other shoe to drop.
Cant buy what you can't afford,
Cant afford happiness,
If you cant find yourself buried under your own mess.
Looking at life though my very own viewfinder,
Not proud of where I am and how I've come to get here,
But am I to old to start anew?
Afraid I'll be left alone without the sun,
What will tomorrow bring?
Well that’s up to me today.

This work is an offering, an invitation to see, feel and think differently about the systems we create and navigate. By sharing my story, I hope to not only illuminate the systemic failures I’ve encountered but also inspire action to build systems that honour the richness of human diversity. Inclusive Design isn’t just about accommodating differences, it’s about transforming systems to reflect and respect the complexity of our shared humanity.

You, yes, you..

The people who’ve been told they don’t belong.
The ones who’ve been asked to bend until they break.
The systems that need to do better.

If this resonates with you, then you are exactly who this work was written for.

A Forest, A Garden, and the Pollinators

- **Stories Are Systems**: Personal narratives reveal the interplay between individual experiences and institutional structures.
- **Inclusive Design Needs Reflection**: Understanding exclusion requires empathy, lived experience, and a willingness to challenge biases. This work advocates for systems that don’t demand resilience as a prerequisite for survival.
- **Poetry as Praxis**: Poetry captures the emotional truths and systemic critiques often overlooked in traditional research.

- **Reflection as Resistance**: For someone with ADHD, reflection is an active process of reclaiming narrative, creating meaning, and challenging systemic erasure.

This work asks us to see differently, think expansively, and act boldly. It is an offering, a call to action, and an invitation to reimagine the possibilities of design, equity, and inclusion. This work is an offering a garden of stories, poetry, and systemic critique cultivated with intention. It invites readers to wander through its paths, noticing its beauty, its weeds, and the ways it mirrors the systems we inhabit. Just as gardens require care, diversity, and attention to thrive, so too must our institutions be redesigned to nurture the richness of human experience. Through this evocative autoethnography, I have planted seeds of change, the pollination of new ideas, and opened a door for deeper cultivation of a more inclusive and equitable public service.

In many ways this is a deliberate effort to expose systemic flaws, interrogate exclusionary practices, and advocate for the redesign of systems that need equity to be part of their core. My story and systemic critique my serve to help understand why inclusive design must not only prioritize diverse perspectives but actively challenge the structural, cultural, and bureaucratic barriers that perpetuate inequity. Inclusive design is really a method of transformation. It is not just tweaking systems but fundamentally rethinking how we approach accessibility, agency, and representation. This journey, though deeply personal, is one that resonates universally. My reflections on ego as both storyteller and subject may have the power to invite others into their own layers of introspection, making my work not just about me but about a shared, collective exploration of identity, power, and impact. There is an interplay of ego, vulnerability and systemic observation.

A reflection on introspection and ego - 2022

As I sit here and recognize that ego plays a deep and multifaceted roll in the work that I do, and how I envision the work. I wanted to create space to sit with it for a while, as a point of reflection and a challenge that I need to overcome in order to navigate this work with humility. I’m sharing deeply personal parts of myself and I have no doubt that ego inevitably is path part storyteller and part subject, which is why I choose the complex layers of poetry, prose, reflection and systemic critique.

I do not choose this path for power or influence, but to share the ways in which I have documented my own internal struggle with vulnerability, authenticity and the reality that I live in. There is tension between my personal experiences and it’s relevance to a wider population. I am aware that I have placed myself at the centre of this narrative, and as such have a requirement for ego, but the larger goal of this work if systemic reform and stretching to see a broader purpose in pinpointing the mismatch of my own neurodivergence and the working world in the public service. This is a place where my chronic illness has been dismissed, the realization that my efforts have often been met with resistance that left me in a place of self-doubt, overcompensation and defensiveness with a raw emotional response to that sense of inadequacy.

I'm attempting to use ego as a teach to demonstrate my own personal areas of growth, and understanding what recalibration was necessary. For me this came in the form of leaving the public service after a 15-year career. There is a voice in my head that says "My story mattress" but I also recognize it's not the only thing that matters. Other stories hold equal weight and there is a need to make room for them. This work is designed to show the ecosystem in which my story exists. Ego in this work is not a barrier, but a way to drive reflection and fuel the courage to question, disrupt and challenge systemic norms.

I've positioned ego as both a necessary presence and an evolving force in my work. Ego is neither villain nor is it a hero. I feel like it is not an antagonist or a protagonist, it is just present in all is forms as an active participant in MY storytelling process. I have found that ego can offer both insight and challenge as I seek to position myself in this work and how that affects my own views and recounting of experiences. This duality reflects a balance between my own self-awareness and the collective awareness I believe is in the world around me. This is a recognition that my story is part of a much larger ecosystem of experiences.

This approach serves to:

- Highlight Shared Humanity: inviting others into the complexity of these experiences.
- Create Space for Others: By centring my story with intention, I attempt model how to amplify other voices and shared realities.

I reframe ego as a teacher rather than an obstacle. Ego became a mirror that reflects areas for growth, recalibration, and deeper understanding. I also reflect the reshaping of ego, the questioning and disrupting of self. This self-awareness is not only a personal act but also a public demonstration of how to navigate the friction between personal frustrations and systemic resistance. Moments of defensiveness or frustration are not dismissed but embraced as signals for where growth is possible. Vulnerability becomes a driving force for asking harder questions and seeking systemic change.

My writing practice reflects the intentionality I aim to bring to systemic critique. By blending poetry, prose, memory, and theoretical grounding, I am creating a layered narrative that mirrors the dynamic, intersecting spaces of lived experience. Within its bounds is the temporal space where our views, perspectives and understandings grow and change over time. This work is inherently transformative because:

- It centres the self to root authenticity in the narrative.
- It decentres the self to create space for collective experiences.
- It holds space for dynamic tension, allowing vulnerability to drive transformation.

I am offering a personal blueprint for how to use ego to illuminate vulnerability, disrupt systemic norms, and create transformative change.

We have the ability to engage deeply with our personal narrative and ego is a cornerstone. Some tools to consider include:

- **Journaling**: Regular reflection on personal experiences and emotions.
- **Mindfulness Practices**: Tools like meditation or grounding techniques can help manage stressors and emotional responses.
- **Somatic Work**: Using body-centred approaches to process emotions and recalibrate.
- **Creative Expression:** poetry, prose, and storytelling, art, sketches, or photo essays add depth and accessibility to your narrative
- **Celebration**: Acknowledging milestones and moments of joy to sustain your energy.

I hope this work represents a strong contribution to the fields of accessibility research, disability justice, and systemic reform by blending personal narrative with systemic critique in a multimodal, evocative framework. My study of self-critiques the tokenism and performativity often present in accessibility initiatives, calling instead for relational accountability and systemic redesign. Through the use of ecological metaphors like gardens and forests, you evoke the interdependence and complexity of systems, underscoring the need for systemic transformation that values the whole person.

By weaving poetry, prose, visuals, and letters, I challenge traditional academic boundaries and offer a more equitable approach to understanding the lived experiences of neurodivergent individuals in public service. Grounded in evocative autoethnography and enriched by feminist and disability justice frameworks, I illuminate how policies and systemic barriers intersect with identity, chronic illness, and neurodivergence.

At its core, the letters I have crafted to various audiences; skeptics, decision-makers, neurodivergent peers, and my future self-create a relational mode of critique that invites dialogue and reflection. This narrative-driven advocacy demonstrates the power of storytelling as a tool for systemic change, offering pathways to reimagine institutions that centre equity and adaptability.

I position personal narratives as critical data, and my work is attempting to redefine how lived experiences can inform systemic design. My attempt at the integration of personal reflection, systemic analysis, and creative expression pushes the boundaries of academic research but also serves to plants seeds for a more equitable, inclusive future. This is my unwavering hope.

Autoethnography – Making the Personal Systemic

Autoethnography bridges the personal and the systemic by inviting researchers to draw upon their lived experiences as a source of critical insight. This systemic context, blending narrative with analysis to reveal the entanglements of self and society ((Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011) is an opportunity to seek change. As Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) note, "autoethnography blurs the boundaries between autobiography and ethnography, enabling researchers to explore the entanglement of self and culture in the pursuit of social change."

As a challenger of traditional and imposed norms, this method appeals to me for this work because the foregrounding subjectivity and emotional resonance are essential components for understanding complex social realities that we as individuals experience based on our identities, environments and worldviews.

In the context of this study, autoethnography enables a critique of public service policies and practices, highlighting the juxtaposition of the spirit of legislation, directives, standards and their associated policies and the realities on the ground. By using my lived experiences as a lens to illuminate the systemic barriers that I faced and led to my eventual departure from the public service in 2022. Chang (2008) describes autoethnography as both a method and a product, focusing on it’s reflexive nature, which “requires the researcher to turn the analytic lens inward and outward, connecting personal struggles to larger social and systemic structures.” I am attempting to make lived experience visible, and an autoethnographic approach disrupts the dominant narratives and reveals hidden institutional batteries often excluded from traditional research methods.

I’m using autoethnography to challenge the notion that research must remain detached and objective, instead promoting relational and understanding approaches to systemic critique. I have blended the narrative of systemic analysis and poetic inquiry to help build on existing scholarship while offering a unique contribution to the field. I have found that this method is particularly well-suited to neurodivergent experiences, such as my own as it offers insights that defy reductive categorization while privileging authenticity, subjectivity, and lived realities. As Payna (2024) explains in their feminist autoethnography study, "autoethnography invites the researcher to occupy multiple roles simultaneously, subject, researcher, and activist, creating a holistic understanding of systemic oppression and pathways for reform."

The evocative nature of autoethnography connects personal narratives to broader political and organizational implications, framing lived experience as critical data for systemic critique and reimagination. Denzin (2014) frames poetic inquiry as inherently political, challenging dominant narratives and exposing structural harm through evocative performance and reflection. Peskin & Ellenbogen (2019) have noted that writing and reflecting on poetry helps to facilitate discovery which supports participants in articulating the nuances of their experiences which is often excluded from traditional methodologies. Autoethnography invites researchers to bring their full selves into the inquiry process, blurring the boundaries between researcher and subject.

Autoethnography and Neurodivergence

As a neurodivergent person I feel like autoethnography provides me with a unique method to critique systemic barriers by highlighting my own personal narratives. I think this is particularly relevant in the context of the public service, where traditional research methods often fail to capture the lived realities of navigating inaccessible spaces and environments. Adams et al. (2017) highlight the interpretive and sensory dimensions of autoethnography, arguing that it allows researchers to “unpack systemic inequities through the lens of lived realities,” making it a powerful tool for critical systemic critique.

When we think about neurodivergence, there is a nuance of experience that is often not captured. When exclusionary practices are repeatedly experienced their is an accumulation of harm. Bailey (2022) contextualizes how autoethnography “provides a reflective space for neurodivergent people to critique the systems that marginalized them.” The opportunity to use personal narratives to highlight the disconnect between policy and practice is particularly relevant.

I have found that autoethnography allows me to explore and capture my lived experiences through storytelling, as it has allowed me to articulate my emotional and cognitive labour as I navigated the systems that have sought to marginalize me and my histories. In this study I have centred my personal narratives as critical data to shiny a light on the impact the multitude of identities such as being disabled, a woman and a public servant.

Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, Botha, and Hens (2023) have argued that neurodivergent individuals possess unique strengths. These can make them invaluable when it comes to critiquing institutional policies, environments and structures. Some of these strengths that they identified resonate with me such as pattern recognition, creative thinking, and systemic analysis. The use of storytelling from a neurodivergent perspective allows for new possibilities in the practice of research by challenging our normative assumptions and creating space for alternative narratives to emerge in the process. These strengths are often undervalued or misunderstood within rigid workplace systems that prioritize conformity and standardization over creative problem-solving. This is also why you often see neurodivergent people in the workforce engaged in and understanding the value of glue work. This invisible work is undervalued and underappreciated (Ming, J, Kamath S, Kuo E, Sterling M, & Dell, N (2022). When I consider this in the context of disability and as Armstrong (2010) notes, autistic individuals and those with ADHD often demonstrate out-of-the-box thinking and innovative approaches to problem-solving, traits that are essential for systemic reform. And yet, these strengths are frequently overlooked in environments that emphasize neurotypical norms of productivity and behaviour. One of the key cognitive strengths I have is my ability to live creativity with the recognition of patterns as I see systemic issues as a constellation that changes shape over time. Bailey (2022) highlights how pattern recognition enables neurodivergent people to identity systemic inconsistencies and gaps that may otherwise go unnoticed. They highlight they the lived experiences of neurodivergent people provide them with a unique lens to critique policies and practices that perpetuate exclusion. "Neurodivergent researchers bring essential insights into how systems operate and how they fail by drawing connections between personal experiences and broader societal patterns." The irony is that neurodivergent strengths are often penalized in workplace environments. In the Canadian Public Service there are rigid performance management systems that fail to recognize the non-linear problem-solving approaches, unique communication systems, and the flux in speed, energy and urgency of task completion that can leave neurodivergent employees vulnerable to bias and exclusion (Harpur et al., 2017).

There is a strong emotional and cognitive toll when people are left to navigate inaccessibility systems. Neurodivergent people may face significant emotional labour in these systems. Ahmed (2017) describes this labour as a form of "institutional friction," wherein individuals must constantly adapt themselves to fit into rigid systems, often at great personal cost. Payne (2024) points out the emotional tool of working within systems that fail to accommodate neurodivergent ways of thinking, doing and being. "The act of navigating institutions that were not designed with us in mind is exhausting and demoralizing. Autoethnography provides a space to voice these experiences, making visible the emotional labour that often goes unnoticed in policy discussions." I have found Ahmed’s (2017) critique of resilience narratives to be deeply resonate here. The expectation that neurodivergent employees must simply “overcome” barriers through personal gift and resilience places the onus on individuals rather than systems to change. As Kafer (2013) challenges, true accessibility requires systemic transformation and not just individual adaptation. Doyle (2020) emphasizes the importance of neurodivergent lived experiences in reshaping institutional practices. "Neurodivergent individuals bring essential insights into how systems must evolve to become more inclusive and adaptive." By drawing on first-hand experiences, autoethnographic research challenges traditional top-down approaches to policy development, advocating instead for human-centred and relational policy-making.

I have found that through autoethnography, as a neurodivergent researcher can challenge these types of narratives by sharing my lived experiences of exclusion, this has offered me an opportunity to provide nuanced critiques of institutional policies. Le (2024) has highlighted the transformative potential of these narratives as they connect the dots between sharing experiences and giving light to the disconnect between policy and lived realities. This has allowed many to reveal the human costs of inaccessible systems. For neurodivergent individuals, autoethnography provides a space to articulate the often-overlooked emotional and cognitive labour required to navigate inaccessible public service systems. By grounding this study in lived experience, this research aims to illuminate the disconnect between policy and practice, while advocating for equity-centred design that recognizes the unique contributions of neurodivergent individuals. The following narrative vignette illustrates how pattern recognition by a neurodivergent public servant reveals inconsistencies in workplace policies that hinder accessibility.

A reflection on institutional friction and the emotional toll of navigating inaccessible systems. The following poetic interlude captures the emotional friction experienced by neurodivergent individuals in public service systems:

Media 4 - Fiction

You say I don't fit.
I say the system was never built to hold me.
Every form,
neat lines, tight boxes,
asks me to bend myself into a shape
I was never meant to be.
The policies say, "We value you."
But the unspoken rules whisper,
"Only if you hide the parts we don't understand."
My patterns are not yours,
but they are patterns nonetheless.
The cracks you call deficits
are where I see the whole.
There are no apologies,
That will rebuilt the bridges that have been burnt,
All that is left for me to do,
is quit.

This designed this poetic interlude to help capture the emotional friction experienced by neurodivergent individuals as they navigate inaccessible systems. The requirement of conformity while claiming to embrace diversity upholds the barriers that many of us face.

For neurodivergent people, intersectionality lays bare the ways systemic barriers don’t just stack, they intertwine. Fox (2024) reminds us that autistic women of colour navigate systems like healthcare, employment, and education that were built around white, neurotypical norms, leaving them to fight battles most don’t see. Chin (2021) points out how traditional disability rights frameworks can miss the mark and overlook the multi-layered realities of those who face discrimination from multiple directions. These stories live in the cracks of systems never meant to hold them. By embracing an intersectional lens, we start to uncover the weight of ableism, racism, sexism, and so much more, particularly for neurodivergent public servants trying to thrive in spaces that often push them to the margins.

This poetic reflection looks to unpack the layered experiences of my potential marginalization as a neurodivergent individual with intersecting identities.

Media 12 - Layers of Exclusion

My diagnosis is one layer.
My gender, another.
My race, a third.
My loss in a colonized world.
The policies say they see me,
but they see only one layer at a time.
They forget the weight of it all.
Intersectionality is not a theory.
It is my reality.

We welcome all identities they said,
Ask for accommodations, if you need it,
But then the phone would never ring.

Years spend extracting myself,
toying with my own head,
disseminating down to my parts,
seeing those I connect with leaving me on read,
I am more than the exclusion that found me,
I see my potential,
And that will allow me to build my new tomorrow,
Without the noose of the public service bounds.

I used the layers here to demonstrate how I found myself again after being ripped into pieces and not seen as a whole human being. My parts, my identities, my layers make me whole.

The process of writing this research paper has been an act of self-love. A way to break free from the structural constraints that have defined my experience in the public service and in life. The ever-present requirement of emotional labour, while deeply personal is so profoundly social and systemic. I am often perceived as a fighter, someone who must constantly advocate for my own needs and the needs of others has placed me in a box that both empowered and limited who I am to be. This work represents a moment of liberation, where I step beyond the enumerable parts of my identity to show up fully, embracing the complexity and the wholeness of my lived experience in its raw forms. Through autoethnography and storytelling I am reclaiming the parts of myself that the systems have sought to fragment allowing me to inhabit my work as my full, authentic self. I see myself as a firekeeper, tending my own fires in solidarity with others who are already doing the work while striking a balance between raging fires that serve no one and igniting the spark of self inquiry as a way to seed the future.

The Value of Recognizing Contributions

There is a weight that could be redistributed in connecting performance and value through people's own contributions. Neurodivergent people may contribute differently to projects and with their teams because of their skills and capacity to think systemically, using creativity and creative problem-solving (Armstrong, 2010). These skills align well with equity-centred design practices. When we think of people in the workforce they are more than the sum of their parts. Whole people deserve a workplace that advocates for approaches that demand we reflect and interrogate how our structures may extend harm by expecting people to mask aspects of their identity. Chronic illness neurodivergence and caregiving responsibilities can intersect, which creates unique barriers that need broader responses instead of individual fixes (Mingus, 2010).

Reflexivity will be central when examining human-centred workplaces, where leaders encourage and actively question their beliefs that they have made and seek to address power differences. These relational leadership modes can offer a blueprint for more inclusive and supportive environments that can prioritize well-being and growth. In my experience, this gets shifted to individuals. I have found this to be burdensome, exhausting and alienating and I struggled to find proper workplace accommodations and began to question how performance and promotion were tied to this framing. I uncovered how the harm sought to shift accountability away from institutions and instead placed band-aids over the holes in the system. It encourages silence as an exchange for the status quo. Feminist scholars like Ahmed (2017) unpack the resilience narrative when they convene conversations about how it obscures the root of problems. Their work shows us how institutions are not addressing inequities or dismantling oppressive structures.

The eraseure of emotional labour, inequity and cumulative harm creeps into what people with disabilities experience daily. When we tell people “At a boy, be more resilient, with the focus on pushing people to rise above their circumstances and prove em’ all wrong perspectives it demonstrates Ahmed’s (2017) critique of the ways resilience is weaponized.
By reframing resilience as a collective responsibility rather than an individual expectation, we can begin to reimagine systems that uplift rather than undermine, enable rather than exploit, and that place the onus of change where it truly belongs, on the structures that perpetuate harm. If we more closely explore feminist theory like the work of Morgan et al. (2022) where they offer a lens to unable both the ableist and patriarchal threads found in the DNA of the public service systems. It eludes to the rigidity that seeks to punish those who fall outside the norms and values that don’t align with equity. This is more than tweaking policies, it’s the foundational change that’s missing. When exploring crip futurity Kafer’s (2013) vision

invites the. Radically different, accessibility beyond the add-on, no more retrofitting, but instead the bones are good. Their work pushes us to explore and rethink the traditional approaches to accessibility.

Pollinating Reflection as Sensemaking for ADHD

It’s a process of making connections between seemingly disparate pieces of information, much like how a pollinator weaves between flowers, I too do this.

ADHD brains like mine are often adept at zooming out to see the big picture while simultaneously zooming in to the micro. I often use this to my advantage as a way of creating my own constellations or garden planning maps.

It’s been more than two years since I started my new role in the private sector, and 2 years since we bought the flower farm. I’ve spent the bulk of my career working in the public service. For many years I thought that being mission driven was the ultimate end goal. Yet, I found myself over and over again struggling with what that mission was, if it was serving people in meaningful ways and what I could do differently. All the while finding myself to be profoundly unfulfilled.

I decided it was time to take a leap of faith. I went on leave. Framed to both myself and those around me where and how I thought being mission driven for good actually could fit into the private sector and what I thought the potential impacts could be given space, time, support and willingness from a solid leadership team. I got lucky, hella lucky even. The support I’ve found in my role has been strong, consistent and giving. It’s also been a forgiving space to grow, adapt and change while feeling I had the tools at my disposal to do so.

I have come to appreciate many of my colleagues very much. Their organic interest into the efforts we’ve put forward has propelled change at a rate even I didn’t imagine would be possible. As I reflect back at the last year I find myself wondering why I held on so long? I can say that much of that was due to how I perceived risk. Fear can destabilize folks quickly. As someone with ADHD and RSD the fear of the unknown, environment, people, perception, rejection and ultimately exposing vulnerability can often lead to harm. Whether it’s that internal little voice calling you an imposter, telling you how badly you are going to mess up. Or in how your brain dissects other people's thoughts, words and body language in relation to their interactions with you. So new environments, new people, new perceived rules can take a toll. Yet sometimes the stars align and much to our surprise things appear lighter at the end of the tunnel and the journey has been made into a fulfilling one.

The spirit of a safety net can bring with it great peace to me. When I navigate spaces where I can get lost in my thoughts and the depth of my own emotions, it can be overwhelming. It’s easy to fall into the pit of emotions that are dark and damaging. It hurts my soul as much as my mind and it derails the path forward. This type of reflection allows me to connect these scattered pieces, weaving them into a coherent narrative. It transforms what may feel like fragmented experiences into a meaningful whole.

I know that my brain can deep dive into specific topics and hyperfocus like a rockstar for certain ideas, interests, or projects with a sense of urgency. For me, reflection is an act of pollination, a way of weaving connections between moments and ideas that might, at first, seem scattered. I'm a bit like a bee that way, moving between the flowers in my garden and utilizing my ADHD brain to filter between the bits and the bytes in order to carry some threads forward across the field. It's a dance between the macro and the micro, seeing the big picture while catching the tiniest details that others might overlook.

I often experience emotional dysregulation or heightened emotional responses. Reflection provides a safe space to process these emotions, explore their roots, and channel them into understanding rather than overwhelm. I built myself a practice where in the heat of emotion I'd hold my email, the message, the comment or post for a little while to allow my sense to circle round. In the times the impulse has been to great the cost has been higher then I'd have liked to pay. This sensemaking helps transform emotional noise into clarity, creating meaning out of moments that might otherwise feel chaotic or unresolved.

I use the way in which my brain operates when it is filled with self-doubt or internalized shame, especially when societal expectations clash with how my process the world is to reframe challenges as opportunities for growth and unique perspectives. When I reflect on setbacks as a result of systemic barriers rather than one personal failures to shift the narrative from self-blame to systemic critique. It's not my worth that is in question, so how might I let go and hold on a little more loosely to an idea, a creative process or a vision of an outcome?

I often process life as a series of vivid snapshots rather than a smooth timeline. Reflection becomes the means of piecing these snapshots together into a cohesive personal story. Writing, poetry, or journaling has helped me to make meaning of my lived experiences by structuring what initially feels disorganized into something tangible and relatable even if it is a little chaotic and non-linear.

I thrive on intuitive leaps and moments of insight. When I take the time to reflect on these moments it allows me to honour my intuition and build trust in my decision-making process. Sometimes when others question this, it leads to significant drops in my confidence and willingness to run with things that I would otherwise push through. I've attempted to foster a deeper self-awareness, which has helped me discern patterns in my choices, values, and responses to the world.

The type of neurodivergence I have has led to a strong sense of curiosity and justice, leading me to think beyond myself and my world to consider broader implications. When I reflect on personal experiences it allows me to situate them within systemic or cultural contexts, deepening the meaning. When working through barriers faced at work, I may internally process a critique of the organizational norms or policies, positioning my personal insights as a foundation for advocacy. I then often share this publicly.

I do not see reflection as a static practice It may start as a stream of thoughts, jump between topics, and then circle back to key insights, evolving over time. This means it's also temporal and why I rely on multimodal means for the reflection process. I take a voice notes, scribble on notepads and post-its, write poetry while jamming to music or even get lost in the white noise while my brain processes. These tools help me to create mental mind maps that capture ideas that are abstract and difficult to articulate into words. It also allows me to quite the noise as I part out emotions, elements and draw out important components, experience, or theme, reflection provides a calming anchor.

Reflection is a central methodology in this autoethnography not only because it uncovers meaning but because it aligns with how I process the world as someone who isn't neurotypical.

- It validates my unique thought processes, which may jump between details, zoom out for patterns, and loop back unexpectedly.
- It transforms the act of "revisiting the past" into an intentional exploration of what those moments mean to me and for the systems that I critique.
- It shows how reflection serves both as a personal tool (for understanding my lived experience) and a systemic tool (for identifying cultural and structural barriers).

By embracing reflection as a neurodivergent strength, my work seeks to challenge traditional, linear academic approaches and showcase the value of nonlinear, relational, and deeply personal meaning-making.

A narrative vignette unpacks to surface level ways that meetings occurred in my tenure and amplifies a real-world example of pattern recognition and systemic critique by a neurodivergent public servant.

Media 5 - The Meeting

Oh look, its another consultation session, let's just call it co-creation and policy view!

The room buzzed with ideas.
Many voices were in the room.
A consultation is people with disabilities, lets call it.

But here they are the same 4 invited in as always.
A panel of mutual expertise.
Productivity, a win.
Less unknowns, that way.
All measured with tracked changes,
And resolved without intent.

But Julianna, she saw something else.
A pattern, a recurring glitch in the system.
A pretendence[2] if you will,
More policies designed to help disabled employees,
But the practice, was the barrier from the start,
Because their words while duly noted,
Would be retracted to disappear,
An ether is hard to find,
Because it's in the form left behind.

"Look here, there is a problem." Julianna said,
Pointing to the disclosures and erasures,
Where did that insight go?
- Oh it's not valuable? How good to know.

Silence.
The others pretending it was okay.
Some says questions "It's a miss this time around, we will circle back."

Not so fast.
Julianna knew,
They were never going to circle back.

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[2] A state of illusion or artifice, a playful or deliberate act of constructing an imagined reality.

Living in a space of lost track.

This narrative shows how neurodivergent insights can challenge normative policies and reveal systemic barriers that might otherwise go unnoticed. It also highlights the emotional toll of constantly explaining one’s lived experience to systems that weren't designed with inclusivity in mind. As Bailey (2022) notes, lived experience provides a critical lens for identifying flaws in institutional structures, this is just one of many examples where the rug in the room was the biggest thief of knowledge. These contributions that were collected like trinkets are often undervalued or ignored in environments that prioritize standardization and conformity (Harpur et al., 2017).

Poetic Inquiry as Living Data

Poetic inquiry is increasingly recognized as a powerful tool for qualitative research, providing a means to evoke emotional resonance and deepen understanding of lived experiences. Poetic inquiry integrates lived experiences into research through verse, offering an emotional and sensory lens to understand systemic inequities. Poetry distils complexities, making them more accessible while retaining depth (Hanauer, 2010). This approach has emerged as a transformative qualitative method that bridges our emotional and cognitive dimensions of research through poetic forms and creates critical inquiry through this captured data.

As Hanauer (2010) notes, poetry allows researchers to process complex emotional experiences and systems critiques into more accessible, evocative narratives. Poetry serves as both data and method in this work, aligning with Hanauer's (2010) assertion that poetry provides a condensed, emotive, and precise form of expression. enabling researchers to distil complex emotions and systemic critiques into accessible narratives. In the context of this research, poetry serves as a medium to explore the emotional toll of systemic barriers and highlight the often-overlooked human cost of accessibility failures. Poetic inquiry allows for an exploration of the emotional dimensions of lived experience. This uniquely enables us to transcend the limitations of traditional academic prose. Peskin and Ellenbogen (2019) have suggested that the process of poetry writing facilitates discovery and reflection, making it a transformative practice for both the researcher and the audience. By integrating poetic interludes, this study invites readers to engage with the emotional and systemic dimensions of disability and neurodivergence.

By using verse as both method and data, poetic inquiry enables researchers to explore the lived experiences of marginalized individuals in ways that traditional academic prose cannot. Denzin (2014) describes poetic inquiry as "inherently political", challenging dominant narratives and illuminating structural harm through evocative performance and reflection. By providing a medium for articulating emotional truths within the context of neurodivergence, poetic inquiry enables difficult experiences to be expressed through linear, structured forms. Peskin and Ellenbogen (2019) argue that poetry facilitates discovery, allowing participants to share nuanced experiences that would often be excluded. This can enable neurodivergent people the space to resist reductive categorizations by embracing complexity and ambiguity as essential components of understanding lived realities.

This poem will serve as a poetic interlude to express the emotional toll of exclusion experienced by my as a neurodivergent personal in public service systems.

Media 6 - Invisible Barriers

They call it policy,
but I call it silence.
The form I filled out,
was it for me,
or for the system to keep me out?
They ask for proof,
as though my words are not enough.
But what they cannot see
are the invisible barriers
I climb every day.

There is never a chance to catch my breath, everyday I will be faced with a new barrier to climb against. I’ve learned instead to push through the mountain rather then to attempt to reach a summit.

This vignette is designed to underscores how poetic inquiry can critique the dehumanizing language of institutional forms, advocating for more relational and human-centred approaches to accessibility.

Media 7 - The Language of Forms

It starts with, “State your diagnosis,"
it long form overwhelmed with personal data,
But my diagnosis is not my story.
I am more than this diagnosis.

They ask for words that fit their boxes,
but I am made of metaphors.
I don’t fit inside those boxes make of tokens,
Hoping to finding a matching pair.

This mismatch is the despair,
Of numbers, timelines, proof of who you are,
But perhaps they should realize,
That my truth is more,
It cannot be measured by checkboxes,
Analyzed by the database,
And triaged to forever waiting.

That form, to self-identity say of my desk for weeks, like an unwelcome guest, yet serving as a reminder that the data requirement was waiting. The wanted to take my informal accommodation and change it to a formalized process. I’d look at it, pick it up and lay it back down on my desk. The edges of the paper were sharp against my skin, occasionally giving me a paper cut. This reminded me of the precision of bureaucratic governance that existed in my world. Neatly in a box, fully detached from humans, as I reread the lines, the text blurred slightly. Everything about it felt sterile and cold.

Pulling out my favourite brightly coloured pen, I darned for a moment to break the suffocating silence with pink text. There was a faint hum from the overhead lights in the office, as I shuffled the paper to write with my left hand. I felt like I was etching my needs into some sort of stone. One that might weigh me down, what if I didn’t say the right thing the right way? Against here I was with the accommodations form next, this wasn’t just a task, it was a ritual I would repeat time and time again as I justified my needs, ones that had been penned too many times.

By combining poetic inquiry with autoethnography, this study seeks to disrupt normative practices, advocating for an inclusive public service informed by lived experience. I hope to show the emotional and systemic flood waters of accessibility failures, advocacy and burnout within the public service system.

Feminism, Intersectionality, and Disability Justice

Feminist theory and disability justice have been essential tools in making sense of my lived experiences as a neurodivergent, chronically ill woman working within the public service. Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality gave me the language to name how overlapping systems of oppression, ableism, sexism, racism, and classism, shape not only the workplace but the deeply personal ways I navigate it. These frameworks go beyond theory; they've become a way to see my experiences clearly and to understand how systemic failures are not random but embedded in the very structures that claim to support us. Ahmed's (2017) critique of resilience narratives resonated deeply with me. The public service systems frame survival in oppressive environments as an individual achievement. Kafer's (2013) vision of crip futurity offered something more, a way to imagine systems built not to fix or adapt people to their environments but to honour and include them as they are. These perspectives shaped how I critique the ableist and patriarchal structures I've moved through, where standardized accessibility policies fall short, rigid and unresponsive to the complexity of real lives.

This provided a critical framework for me to understand the overlapping systems of oppression and expanded my knowledge of what I was experiencing as a neurodivergent, chronically ill, female public servant who was working at the intersection of technology and services. Ableism, sexism, racism and classism have such distinct impacts on our experiences. This framework was essential for my approach to critiquing public service systems, which often fail to account for the complex identities of their employees. Intersectionality helped examine how neurodivergence intersects with my other identities, and by doing so creates unique systemic barriers that standardized accessibility policies overlooked, are were not designed with the flexibility needed, leaving needs unmet. (VanDaalen, 2022)

Disability justice, as articulated by Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018) and Clare (2017), seeks to extend this conversation by centring collective care through accessibility, and the dismantling of systemic barriers. It calls out the neoliberal glorification of resilience, the expectation that we should endure harm as a mark of strength, and instead demands genuine support and inclusion.

For me, disability justice reframed accessibility not as a technical checklist but as a relational and systemic commitment, a call to honour the full humanity of those who have long been pushed to the margins. This work pushes for systems that nurture, sustain, and uplift, rejecting resilience narratives in favour of building better structures for everyone.

Inspired by Costanza-Chock's Design Justice framework, this poetic interlude emphasizes the need for participatory, inclusive design processes. Sometimes I strived to achieve but found myself in constant blockade during my time as a public servant.

Media 8 - Redesigning Systems

The system, it was never built for the likes of me.
It was built for them, the ones who had control,
those who designed it, their power loud in my ears,
As they continued who benefit from it shape,

But what if we redesigned it?
What if we asked the ones
who live with the cracks,
who see the gaps,
And turned those gaps into bridges,
Without trojan horses,

We are not broken.
The system is.

This was when I started to reframe how I perceived myself from being a person with a broken brain to someone who could change the vastness before me with how apt I was at recognizing the system like a map throughout the environment, all in my head.

This wee narrative demonstrates how the exclusion of historically marginalized voices from policy design perpetuates systemic barriers in public service systems and that has an effect on everyone.

Media 9 - The Missing Voices

They said they wanted to make the workplace more inclusive.
They were going to reach out,
And out, and out, and out again.
A survey here, a surgery there,
A consultant or a dozen,
But rare was it I saw us bring in and compensate for lived life,
They excluded on the pretense of inclusion,
Even though they were screaming at the top of their lungs,
no response to this question,
As they spoke up with audacious hope,
“Why weren’t we part of the process?”
Another echoed in the crowd,
“I provided comments, but they are no where to be found
These questions, they were met with quietness
The silence in the room spoke volumes.
Inclusion is not designed for,
Just the fakery of conversation,
For the sake of inclusive troves,
Yet the pirate are still searching,
For the treasure of one that centres missing voices.

This artifact details my experiences where I felt stuck in “research” and “consultation” that was exploitive, extractive, transactional and just swept away as if the conversations never did arise.

A Critical Lens on Disabled Voices and Design Justice

I have found that Costanza-Chock's Design Justice framework can provide a critical lens for how public service systems can be redesigned to be more participatory. There needs to be fail safes sin relationship to how neurodivergent voices are centred in policy design. These public institutions can move beyond performative inclusion to meaningful systemic change when we achieve a willingness to meet neurodivergent employee's where they are. The principles of design justice on accessibility could ensure that these policies are created with rather than for disabled communities. Yet, in much of my career I heard this, but the reality was that inviting in, did not lead to transformative change because these opportunities were swept away as too difficult, too cost prohibitive, always too much of something. We need to find a balance to align with disability justice advocates who call for systemic reforms that prioritize relationality, flexibility and intersectional accessibility (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018).

The way that resilience is glorified in the public discourse often serves to obscure the real issues. Ahmed (2017) points out this neoliberal construct, that seems to create and show hostile conditions as celebratory triumphs. Kafer (2013) takes this further, showing how resilience narratives uphold ableism. Pointing out the ways in which individual success stories are highlighted as raising the bar, while conveniently ignoring the structural barriers that make resilience necessary in the first place. In the context of disability, these narratives don't empower, they erase and divert attention away from root causes.

This work builds on those critiques, asking why resilience is the price of participation in public service systems. Why do we continue to design structures that force people to fight so hard just to exist within them? Instead of perpetuating the expectation of resilience, we should be advocating for systemic designs that meet people where they are designs that don't require anyone to overcome disproportionate challenges just to be included.

Media 6 – The dandelion’s resolve

the scar tissue is ever-present,
etching myself a home between layers of cold concrete,
oh, how I was just a peasant,
but somehow I found safety in the street,
my footprints echo in my ears now,
for all the pain I did allow,
I paused, not sure if the doors would open,
but like a weed, I pushed through,
and even when broken,
I pled with the night,
to find a way, despite the fight,
I was not chosen, I was a rebel seed,
taking space so that my roots could feed,
there was no glory in this path,
but I had no warmth for the math,
I’m a defiant way like that of the dandelion form,
fragile but capable of weathering the storm,
would I be enough, with all my might,
I whispered “I love me enough” into the night.

I love the symbolism of the dandelion. Its defiance to grow in the face of barriers and its capacity to thrive in the harshest conditions is something of a mirror to my own intrinsic need to find a way to grow with purpose in spaces and places where it seemed an impossibility. This metaphor aligns strongly with the themes in this work. I am more than virtue-singling, I am pushing back against the adversity that sought to squash me and living with vulnerability. I will dare to exist, to question, to disrupt and unlearn. So that I can create patterns for myself as I carve out a future that honours my lived experience. Through the lens of my lived experience, I uncover the pervasive gap between institutional policies and their practical implications for marginalized groups. My story illustrates the necessity of addressing forced disclosure, rethinking accessibility frameworks, and fostering environments that value neurodivergent and chronically ill voices as essential, not supplementary to equity work.

The Disconnect Between Policy and Practice

It has been noted that accessibility research has elevated significant gaps in the implementation of inclusive policies within public institutions. Dolmage (2017) for instance critiques the performative aspects of accessibility initiatives, arguing that they often prioritize optics over any real or substantive change.
Public institutions have often claimed to prioritize inclusivity through their accessibility policies, but those policies fall short of addressing the lived realities of these individuals. I found out for myself what it looks like to see an large organization with many branches inconsistently adopting these policies, throwing up barrier after barrier and hoop after hoop.

Researchers like Baker (2011) and Rebecchi (2023) argue that the "one-size-fits-all" approach to policy design fails to account for intersecting identities of individuals with disabilities. This study expands on these critiques by examining how these dynamics manifest in the lived experiences of neurodivergent public servants. However, there is a limited exploration of how these policies intersect with neurodivergence and chronic illness in professional contexts. I hope to contribute to filling this gap through my personal reflections that examine the emotional and systemic barriers faced by myself as a neurodivergent public servants, and offering a nuanced critique of existing accessibility challenges, proposing pathways for more inclusive design.

A Short Story About Language and Identity

This is from my perspective. Not every disabled public servant will share my experiences, or have my expectations for change. I'm not aiming to speak for others, just elevate my own observations working and living in that space as a disabled public servant myself. For me - It felt like a performance. Some masquerade between authenticity and a profound spiritual and mental cost. The expectation of “tell your story, over and over again” ate at me every day in the last year I existed in that space. Yet, few with decision-making power listened or if they were listening their actions remained aligned with institutions, their finances and managers will little support or understanding of the disability community, or our needs. In some cases, their own curiosity drove them more than repairing the damaged links that led to derailing meeting of our access needs. We become scapegoats for why hiring is hard. But in reality, not all of the needs are that complex. Some simply require more yes and fewer no, or answers instead of silence, walls and ambiguity.

Disability isn’t a dirty word. I am disabled. I can still function, grow, learn, adapt, provide, shine, and fail, just like anyone else. Yet the justification for existing as we are, requesting tools and environments that we need to thrive is routinely rejected. Often for reasons that do not do service to public spaces, public institutions or private ones. Some think we have made progress but I felt like a 1990s cd stuck on repeat. If there is a scratch that changes the path, it becomes a mountain. People take advantage of that mountain in the name of allowing lived experiences to guide us, yet suppressing it at every turn when it was meant to spur action. I felt like someone holding up recycling that was bound for the trash can. To be disabled in the public service can erode one's sense of self. Every new manager wants a justification. This means we need to protect ourselves more, tread carefully in our engagements, and worry about reprisals that should not be an option at any point in this process. Every new ask, slight shift or change in medical status under microscopes. Yet our non-disabled counterparts asking for shifts for health, family, and children find a different set of rules, levels of resistance and playfields to navigate than we do. Talk to HR, talk to Labour Relations, talk to Health Canada, talk to Informal Conflict Management - but the stress from these talks, so few people and places address. The burden lying at our feet is immense.

As someone with ADHD it’s like a form of tax, if there are enough steps, hiccups and paperwork I’m likely to get derailed and give up. It’s why I became an advocate for other disabled public servants. It wouldn’t give up for others. That became a motivator. In over 1,100 office hours in the last 5 years of my career + the first year away from the public service more than 200 were with disabled public servants. They were trying to navigate the system and find support, a person who would listen and perhaps understand. I questioned my own sense of value so many times. I’d step into a room, declare who I was and in some spaces, folks sat and listened and in others, people rolled their eyes. Oh…it’s that one again, “making more trouble”. This meant adopting an approach of chronic oversharing, attempting to have persuasive conversations with people at those tables.

I used this as a tool. Many of them used it as a weapon. I felt mentally defeated. Here we were supposedly going to hire 5,000 new disabled public servants, but each department was for the most part just passing the same people along, demanding more self identification to reduce their recruitment burden, yet managers not having the training to understand the implications, impacts, or being equipped to support disabled public servants. It became a magnet for conflict. It drained me of all of my willpower to keep up the “good fight”. I was a burnt-out candle whose wick was too short. There is disillusionment with the ability as a public service to embrace the diverse talent that comes with disability in favour of the comfort and status quo of those who are entrusted to evaluate our worth, yet always find us lacking. Even against all odds, many of us succeed and exceed. We keep going, in part because we have to. In part because we are in fact capable, even in environments that seek to further disable us.

The Failure of Leadership and Trust

Public service systems publicly pride themselves on equity and inclusion, but in my experience there is a hollowness in those promises. When policies are performance-driven rather than people-centred, they fail to account for the complexities of human experience. My miscarriage wasn’t seen as a valid reason for underperformance. It was seen as a disruption. This experience became a foundational moment in my journey towards leaving for new opportunities. It reinforced my belief that policies must be designed with human difference in mind. It’s not enough to claim inclusivity. Systems need to live those values through understanding, adaptability, and trust.

There are many policy gaps within the existing accessibility frameworks. Systemic gaps in policy implementation create epistemic injustice. Too often disabled individuals' lived experiences are discounted or ignored in favour of bureaucratic compliance measures. I saw this repeatedly throughout the open office hours that I ran as a public servant from 2018-2022. Despite legal obligations to accessibility, many policies and the guidance for implementation of these policies are rooted in outdated frameworks that seek to priority compliance over meaningful inclusion (Baker, 2011). Digital inclusion initiatives often fail to accommodate the diverse cognitive and sensory needs of neurodivergent people. I saw this time and time again when conferences were offered without captions, CART services or ASL. Platforms procured that had no reasonable mechanism to provide these types of services. As Rebecchi (2023) concludes, ”policies designed to ensure inclusion frequently perpetuate exclusion by requiring neurodivergent individuals to adapt to environments that are not designed with their needs in mind.”

These critiques highlight the emotional and cognitive labour required by neurodivergent individuals to navigate inaccessible systems, reinforcing the emotional toll of systemic barriers discussed earlier. I would spend the most of the time while attending events, conferences and workshops navigating accessibility needs for other public servants that were going unmet. Even when detailed analysis of the issues, opportunities and impacts were presented it often would take years for something to be resolved in any meaningful way. The same problems would repeatedly occur.

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The Accessible Canada (ACA) alludes to the promise of a barrier-free Canada by 2040. It's a big and bold goal. Yet if you were to ask disabled public servants like myself about our day-to-day experiences, you are likely to hear a very different story. What may look like change on paper doesn't always translate into reality. The policies may exist, but the systems and processes that enable them don't actually work. Those are still missing in the fundamentals for execution.

Dickson (2023) puts this rather bluntly, the problem is not the lack of policies, it's that those policies don't have teeth. They look good in press releases and at international forums, but without useful mechanisms to hold departments accountable, they are just words. The gap between the promise and the delivery is something I experienced while in public service. Departments love to talk about their accessibility “wins,” but those self-assessments often paint an overly rosy picture that doesn’t reflect the reality of disabled employees. The barriers are still there, in hiring, retention, promotion, and even in day-to-day tasks.

Media 13 - Invisible Systems

My attempt to show care the invisible barriers within policy frameworks, the following poem reflects on the emotional impact of navigating inaccessible bureaucracies as a person with lived experience of disability.

Invisible Systems
Policies on paper,
promises of change.

But the forms still ask
for proof I cannot give.

Inclusion is a checkbox.
But my story doesn't fit
in their boxes.

I am instead left in the cold,
No tools to stead my progress,
Don't ask me to be bold,
In this place of regress.

No matter what boxes we check, we are falsely categorized and statistically discriminated against anyways. The policies serve little purpose, but a platitude for hope.

Public Policy and the Federal Workplace

The Accessible Canada Act and the Employment Equity Act which both promote inclusive workplaces have fallen short in addressing the specific needs of neurodivergent employees. This may change as new standards are created and more robust processes are put in place, but the way in which the public service operates will need to change from a reactive approach for accommodations to a proactive one, and dismantling of systemic exclusion that focuses people to adapt o pre-existing structures rather than reshaping systems to accommodate diverse ways of working (Harpur et al., 2017).

There is a deep compliance culture within the walls of the public service, with a focus on legal requirements that soften based on a particular department's risk posture. While scholars have argued that co-created frameworks, which draw on the lived experiences of people from these communities are essential, I believe it goes further than that. Many in leadership roles do not understand true co-creation and the efforts are often extractive and exploitive with little change on the other side.

Harpur et al. (2017) critique accessibility policies for their limited scope, emphasizing that many public institutions penalize non-normative behaviours and reinforce systemic barriers rather than dismantle them. I have personally experienced issues with performance management systems in the Canadian public service. Standardized evaluations often disadvantage neurodivergent employees, in are more likely to excel in non-traditional forms of collaboration, creativity, problem-solving and innovation. The hierarchical structures and inflexible job designs perpetuate exclusion by calling conformity over creativity, (Baker (2011). These types of barriers are more likely to affect neurodivergent employees who may experience difficulties with rigid workplace expectations.

This poem examines the disconnect between policy intentions and lived experiences.

Media 14 - The Legal Promise

The Accessible Canada Act promised inclusion.
"A workplace for everyone," they said.
A barrier-free Canada is just ahead.

I was more than 10 years in,
Hopeful that this was the change I sought,
But it did not take long,
For the realization to dawn,
The policies to come would not see me,

There was no more court mandate,
No accountability, and with it the shifts game,
Let it slide to 80% compliant,
No, 72% is just fine,
Until it was not longer important,
Access fell to the weigh side,
While few were watching,
Because the stories told,
Gave a false hope for the future ahead.

I felt what appeared to be a disguise, a lie if you will. This pretendence was the beginning of the end. It’s what sparked my return to attempt academia again. Given the failure factor that I’d experienced in higher education it was a risk, but one I could not ignore. I needed this. I had to set my feet on the ground and claw my way forward.

With this I wrote a poem that encapsulates that feeling. Standing before gates, waiting to be judged and decided that I am worth more than the gaze of those who would seek to invalidate me, my needs, and my existence because that was easier than questioning and disrupting rules that were arbitrary, ineffective and devoid of the humanity they pretend that they centre.

Media 10 - Validate - the bloom cycle

I stand before your bureaucratic gate,
I don't know yet my fate,
I'm not an intruder,
but I feel - the outsider,
my soul seeks space,
but there is not a trace,
of me present now.

They whisper not so quietly,
Who are you?
Why do you need this?
Have you earned it?
What will you lose?

My heart, my worth,
measured by forms and signatures,
my voice, my needs,
caught in the webs of policies unwritten,
and my hands,
reaching for the tools needed for tomorrow,
denied by a shadow committee without sorrow.

They never saw me,
I am not here,
a life audited and found lacking,
no justification, no tracking,
the walls may not be stone,
but the chains held me just the same.
They might decide I am unworthy,
but I know I am enough,
how many hearts have we dimmed,
by this endless parade of asking,
the unyielding need,
to validate what is in front of them?

Alive and with purpose…
I step away from your face,
I am not unworthy,
I will find myself a new tomorrow,
in the space beyond the now,
I will plant seeds of my own making,
where no one asks to see the roots,
before I'm ready to share what is yet to bloom.

I will bloom tomorrow, and the day after that and with the rhythm’s of nature. With those winds I will change, new pollinators entering myself and leaving their mark on what will reshape who I am for tomorrow.

The Disability Inclusion Business Council's report focuses on how employers can improve disability inclusion. However, it continues to emphasize what employers need rather than prioritizing the experiences and needs of disabled employees themselves. The report highlights recommendations on workplace culture, inclusive design, and recruitment, but it lacks concrete steps for addressing the systemic barriers that disabled employees face in their day-to-day work.

There is an existing goal that the Employment Strategy for Canadians with Disabilities to close the employment gap by 2040, but it is evident that this strategy lacks real, tangible targets to measure the support provided to disabled public servants in navigating the systemic barriers of inaccessible systems within the public service.

The lack of centralized accommodations processes across departments. While this exists in practice my experience with the disability passport as one of those who piloted that effort while at the Canadian Human Rights Commission shows it needs significant work. There is little infrastructure set up to make this successful and as technology requirements fall under the preview of each department, they do not have the same approved software's, or exceptions. So while your "passport" is supposed to travel with you, it often does not. This is one of the aspects that led to my personal need to disclosure my disabilities to managers, directors, and even an IT steering committee in an effort to obtain the tools I needed to be effective in my job.

The absence of clear accountability mechanisms when accessibility policies are not followed. This particular situation is challenging to remedy. Many mid level managers are not aware in the ways that are necessary to support neurodivergent employees. I had to prove myself repeatedly to someone that I did not have a lack of attention to detail, or that I was prone to making mistakes simply because I had ADHD. They were intolerant of my need to work at a specific pace, even though I rarely missed a deadline while reporting to them. It highlighted to me the stigma that is attached to disability, even with all the awareness campaigns in an institution that size of the public service in Canada.

Ongoing systemic ableism in hiring, promotion, and workplace culture. Without addressing these core issues, the employment strategy risks being little more than a symbolic gesture. This is emphasized by how ableism in workplace policies and practices continue to present real barriers to disabled employees, much like myself. (Sharma, R. H., et al., 2024) What of the hiring practices and promotional pathways that currently do not reduce the barriers of entry into the public service and instead just move disabled public servants from one department to another? This was a pattern for me as I took internal corporate work assignments, secondments with other departments and made lateral moves. This was most apparent when I was working with the Canadian Digital Service and was offered a policy job to work on the Accessibility Policy for the whole of government. I was offered a lateral move, even though the person in the position with that responsibility before me was several levels higher. The role was not going to be set up for success long term and was putting me in the position that would have reinforced exclusionary norms where myself was judged as “lacking” even though I was seen as capable because my education did not match the job profile.

Senior leaders in the public service are keen to highlight Canada's leadership on accessibility at international forums. But for those of us who are disabled and working within the public service this dialogue feels disconnected from what we are experiencing on the ground. They present policies like the Accessible Canada Act (ACA) as key progressive milestones. These achievements are framed to show Canada's commitment to creating a barrier free society. Something that has been heralded for 2040. Canada has a reputation that shines on the global stage, domestically, disabled employees continue to encounter barriers that have been flagged for years and yet there is little meaningful change happening.

In my time as a disabled public servant who worked on accessibility-related files, I sat in meetings where leaders would proudly speak about our accessibility achievements, but I found myself still navigating a workplace that I found to be anything but accessible. This was something that would be a pattern in the open office hours that I help with other public servants from 2018-2023. As noted previously my requests for accommodations were frequently met with delays and as I changed departments that cycle would start all over again. There was a stark contrast to the story being told and the reality of being a disabled employee struggling to access basic tools and support for my day-to-day life.

As Dickson (2023) points out, "Policy successes are frequently framed through international engagement and recognition, but the absence of meaningful accountability mechanisms domestically undermines the lived experiences of marginalized groups.” There is an interesting duality here, where projecting success abroad while neglecting domestic realities. This reinforces harm through disabled employees' experiences when they are told this progress is already happening, while their own barriers and experiences feel invalidated and erased. For me, this disconnect created a deep sense of frustration and one that I could not easily reconcile. How could we be leaders in accessibility when I could not get the most basic of accommodations without significant hoops, if ever?

Prince (2009) describes this type of occurrence as "absent leadership", where there is a focus put on symbolic achievements, and those achievements obscure the actual needs of disabled people in Canada and whether or not those achievements are actually changing lives for the better. Policies that may look good on paper, and leaders that celebrate these milestones at international forums, leave me questioning the impact on lived realities for those they are supposed to serve. This type of performative engagement with accessibility highlights the discrepancy I have been pointing out around optics being the key driver rather than outcomes for people. In my experience, it has felt much more like the public service was most concerned with appearing accessible rather than actually doing the hard work to make the workplace more equitable for disabled employees.

The lack of accountability mechanisms is critical to this issue as it widens the gap that we have between rhetoric and reality. Stienstra (2020) notes that Canada's policies lag behind international commitments, leaving disabled people behind to navigate these inaccessible systems without due recourse. This is why there are significant efforts underway by several of the Accessible Standards Canada's task forces to create stronger recommendations for standards, directives and policies. I lived this reality firsthand. While we had leaders discussing bold visions of a barrier-free Canada, I was stuck in a bureaucratic loop, waiting for accommodations that would allow me to better perform at work without additional mental and emotional burdens. Navigating these strains fell directly on my shoulders, a burden that as Hiranandani and Sykes (2021) argue, demonstrates the persistence of systemic ableism that is still found within Canadian institutions.

The most disheartening thing about this was the realization that my experience was not unique. I had colleagues in similar or worse situations, and they were sharing their own stories with me of how bureaucratic hurdles and unfulfilled promises had left them feeling hopeless. Despite these shared experiences, so little has changed. The policies and strategies that are supported to make these workplaces more accessible have yet to find real traction. A global pandemic, transitions in employment status and leaders moving from one department to another without seeing work followed through surely contributed to these delays.

It is easier to talk about achievements on the global stage than it is to address the deeply embedded ableism within the existing public service structures. But for those of us living with the consequences of these gaps, the impact is real, and at times incredibly painful. It's not just about the delayed or denied accommodations, it's about the message these experiences send while upholding an image of excellence. Disabled employees are not prioritized, our needs are secondary to maintaining the institution's image.

This was also a contributing factor in my decision to leave the public service. While I strongly still believe in the mission of public service I choose to exit knowing I could not continue with the belief that the barriers I continued to face were so unimportant. Canada may be a leader in accessibility on paper, but until we address the systemic issues at home, these policies will remain performative. This is currently a system that does not live up to its values, I now exist in spaces where my contributions are recognized without the need to constantly validate my needs and existence.

The federal public service needs to stop focusing on celebrating milestones and start delivering real results. Accessibility isn't a checkbox exercise. It's about creating a workplace that genuinely supports all employees, particularly those who have been historically marginalized. The gap between what's said in policies and what happens in practice is glaring, and it's time for real progress.

Implementing centralized, consistent accommodation processes across departments to eliminate delays and inconsistencies. The current systems are inconsistent and inefficient. In reality it should not matter what department someone works in, the process for requesting, receiving and the types of accommodations should be clear, standardized and timely. This does not mean that only a small set of tools should be available, this should be assessed based on individual needs. Not all tools are equal, and not all tools are processed the same way by our brains. Microsoft project vs. Trello is an example of this. I was told just use project, but I need keyboard accessibility, colour coding, visuals and key reference points. I found Trello to be much more effective for my processing needs, memory recall and usability. There should not be endless delays, or bureaucratic games. Consistency is key.

Introduce accountability mechanisms to ensure accessibility policies are followed and to provide recourse when they are not. Accessibility policies without true accountability are just words on paper, easy to ignore and forget about. There must be a way to hold departments accountable when they miss their commitments to accessibility. Disabled employees should not have to fight this system along, there needs to be clear recourse when the policies are unmet.

We need to stop requiring forced disclosures of disabilities as part of the accommodation process. Disabled employees should not have to repeatedly disclose their disability status to justify accommodations, or be put on parade in order to convince a technology or strategic planning committee that a tool is needed based on their needs. This process is invasive, dehumanizing and totally unnecessary. It creates more ableist idents about disabilities, hurts trust with employees and puts their job prospects and potential at risk. Trust employees when they tell you they need something to do their job.

Adopt trauma-informed care principles in the design and implementation of policies affecting disabled employees. There is a need for policies that impact disabled people to be designed with trauma informed care at the centre of the work. This means that the policies and their creation process that prioritize safety, trust, peer support, collaboration, empowerment and cultural humility. Since the Government of Canada is culturally diverse, a one-size-fits-all approach will be wholly insufficient.

These principles should shape the entire process from how accommodations are provided to how these policies are drafted and communicated.

Focus on outcomes, not just awareness, by measuring the actual impact of accessibility initiatives on the day-to-day experiences of disabled employees.

The public service needs to measure the actual impact of accessibility initiatives on the daily lives of disabled employees. Are accommodations being properly delivered? Are the unmet needs now met? Are barriers being removed? Are employees able to thrive or are they still fighting for the tools and processes that they need? Measure what matters.

The public service must move beyond *celebrating milestones* and focus on *delivering results*. Accessibility is not a checkbox exercise, it's about creating a public service that genuinely supports all employees, particularly those who have historically been marginalized. The time for performative progress has passed. The federal public service must move beyond empty promises and surface-level achievements. It's time to build a workplace that recognizes and values disabled employees, not as an afterthought or a box to check, but as a core part of what makes the public service better for everyone.

Performative Accessibility vs. Genuine Transformation

Leadership often paint a rosy picture of progress, but the lived realities of disabled public servants tell a different story. Many of the initiatives highlighted are *performative* rather than transformative. They emphasize *awareness* and *intent* without delivering the systemic change that disabled employees need.

Dickson's (2023) research sought to highlight the dangers of performative accessibility measures. Where initiatives prioritize optics over outcomes. They critiqued how these polices are often framed in such a way that the satisfy political agendas but fail to address the root causes of exclusion. I believe that this critique is very relevant to the current approach to accessibility from the public service. Where we see the celebration of milestones without addressing the realities of lived experiences. The ACA is a significant legislative achievement, but it lacks the teeth to be enforceable without strong accountability mechanisms. This leaves departments free to interpret and implement accessibility measures in ways that may obscure actual progress. Without external oversight, and a lack on consequences for non-compliance that feels real. Even though there is an enforcement arm designed to measure this within the Canadian Human Rights Commission, I do not believe they are well positioned to evaluate where they are influenced as part of the government infrastructure. For many disabled public servants, this performative approach has manifested in the form of panels, awareness campaigns and they invitation to “brave conversations” but more often than not they do not translate those conversations into concrete changes in policy or practice. As Dickson (2023) states, genuine includes will require moving beyond these symbolic gestures to focus on the dismantling of structure barriers.

The public service loves to talk about progress on accessibility, but the reality is that it’s more about appearing inclusive than actually being inclusive. Policies and initiatives get celebrated like big wins, but until the systemic barriers are removed and workplace trauma is addressed, they’re just symbolic victories. The real test isn’t how many milestones are reached or how many events are held, it’s whether disabled employees actually feel the impact of these initiatives in their day-to-day work lives.

I have lived this disconnect, I’ve seen the reports and heard the speeches about “bold actions” and “brave conversations.” But I’ve also experienced the reality of navigating an inaccessible system that never seems to change. The gap between what’s being said at the top and what’s actually happening on the ground is massive and for disabled employees like me, it’s exhausting.

There’s a real problem with how accessibility is framed in the public service. The narrative often celebrates the resilience of disabled employees applauding us for navigating barriers, for making it work despite the odds, instead of focusing on the fact that those barriers shouldn’t exist in the first place. We’re not asking for pats on the back for surviving an inaccessible system. We’re asking for that system to be dismantled.

As Goldberg (2024) points out, workplace trauma isn’t just about the barriers themselves. It’s about the ongoing emotional toll of having to fight for access to a system that’s supposed to support you. Accessibility policies need to move beyond awareness and perceived symbolic gestures to the world. They need to be trauma-informed, focusing on dignity, respect, and autonomy for disabled employees. It’s not about brave conversations. It’s about delivering real results, eliminating trauma, reducing barriers, and creating workplaces where everyone can thrive.

But that’s not what’s happening right now. While the public service celebrates some of its milestones, there should be a period of reflection because disabled employees are still dealing with systems that retraumatize them daily. The disconnect between those two narratives, the polished, feel-good version and the messy, painful reality is a critical issue. Right now, it’s all about optics over outcomes.

One of the most damaging parts of the current system is the way in which disabled employees are forced to prove their disabilities over and over again. Goldberg (2024) talks about how employers demand excessive medical documentation and then share it unnecessarily within organizations. It leaves people feeling vulnerable and erodes trust. Having gone through this myself, its excluding by its very nature. Dickson (2023) points out that the current systems force employees to supply medical documentation to justify accommodations. While this also reinforces a harmful narrative that disabled employees need to be fixed or validated by experts it is always wasting valuable time of our doctors who are already in crisis trying to meet everyday needs for sick people in Canada. Privacy and confidentiality need to be prioritized in the accommodations process. There shouldn't be fear that our records will be passed around like office gossip.

We worry about being ignored or dismissed.
We fear judgment about the legitimacy of our requests.
We brace ourselves for the discomfort our presence might cause.
And if we push too hard, we risk retaliation. We are seen as abrasive, angry and unreasonable.

If the public service is to be serious about accessibility it will need to go much further than it does today. It's more than a shift in culture, its about the rot in the foundation. It’s time to stop applauding resilience and start dismantling barriers. It’s time to stop talking about bold actions and start taking them. Because until that happens, accessibility will remain performative and disabled employees will keep paying the price.

This critique is particularly relevant to the public service’s approach to accessibility, which often celebrates milestones without addressing the lived realities of disabled employees. While the ACA is a significant legislative achievement, lacks enforceable accountability mechanisms. This means its left to departments to freely interpret and implement accessibility measures as they see fit. Without consistency, proper oversight, and at varying levels, making measurement very difficult as the measurements and guideposts are not the same from department to department, or even area to area within a department. Without external oversight or consequences for non-compliance, the risk of performative progress becomes inevitable. This requires embedding accessibility into workplace structures and processes from the outset, rather than treating it as an add-on or afterthought. (Thimsen, 2022) is spot on in their take that public institutions often engage in performative actions that project support for marginalized groups but fail to implement any meaningful, system changes.

This retrospective demonstrates a persistent issue in the public service’s approach to accessibility: a focus on optics over outcomes. The emphasis on celebrating progress often comes at the expense of addressing the very real barriers that remain in place. Dickson does highlight that Canada has made legislative strides toward inclusion, implementation often falls short due to inflexible administrative structures, lack of accountability, and the persistence of ableist norms within policies and institutions.

I am showcasing the inadequacy of existing public policies to fully support neurodivergent employees in Canadian federal workplaces. The Accessible Canada Act and Employment Equity Act represent important legal commitments, but they fall short of addressing the nuanced needs of neurodivergent individuals. While these policies represent important legal milestones, they serve as a signal to commitment within public institutions. However, as this study has illustrated through a combination of lived experience and critical analysis, these policies often fall short in their practical implementation. There is a deep systemic failure between policy intent and lived experiences. This is perpetuating exclusion through bureaucratic compliance measures instead of genuine, transformative inclusion.

Policies that frame inclusion as a checklist of accommodations place the burden on individuals to adapt to environments that remain inherently inaccessible. In the Canadian federal workplace, this often manifests as a reliance on reactive accommodations rather than proactive systemic change. Instead of reimagining systems to meet people where they are, public institutions demand that employees prove their need for support, often through dehumanizing processes that prioritize proof over trust. As Costanza-Chock (2020) argues in their Design Justice framework, policies that are created for marginalized communities without meaningful participation from those communities are unlikely to succeed in dismantling structural barriers.

This critique applies directly to the participatory processes that public institutions often promote as inclusive policy-making mechanisms. These processes are frequently performative in nature, serving to validate pre-existing decisions rather than to genuinely incorporate lived experiences into policy design. In my experience as a public servant, I witnessed participatory processes that were framed as consultative and inclusive, but in practice, they operated as extraction exercises, gathering insights from neurodivergent and disabled individuals without any real intention of systemic change.

Participation is not enough if it’s tokenistic. Inclusion is not a checkbox. True inclusion requires shared power, accountability, and a willingness to confront uncomfortable truths about the systemic barriers that exist within public institutions. Without these elements, participatory processes simply serve to maintain the status quo under the guise of progressive reform.

As Ahmed (2017) talks about how institutions are skilled at creating the appearance of diversity and inclusion, but they rarely engage in the deep structural work required to repair systemic inequities. This "diversity work", as Ahmed calls it, often falls on the shoulders of marginalized individuals themselves, who are expected to educate their peers and advocate for the needed change within systems that were never designed to support them. This is particularly true for neurodivergent employees, who often find themselves navigating layers of institutional friction that go unnoticed by neurotypical colleagues.

The emotional and cognitive labour of engaging in these processes can be exhausting and demoralizing. As Ahmed (2017) points out, the expectation that marginalized individuals must simply "be resilient" in the face of systemic barriers is a neoliberal construct that shifts the responsibility for change from institutions to individuals. Instead of working to uncover the root causes of exclusion, institutions frame survival as a personal achievement, celebrating resilience while ignoring the broader structural failures that necessitate it.

I've experienced the emotional toll of navigating inaccessible public service systems that claim to prioritize inclusion while continuing to reinforce exclusionary practices. The expectation that myself and others like me must repeatedly advocate for basic accessibility needs is a form of institutional gaslighting, where the burden of change is placed on individuals rather than on the systems that perpetuate harm.

Doyle (2020) points to the importance of neurodivergent lived experiences in reshaping institutional practices, "Neurodivergent individuals bring essential insights into how systems must evolve to become more inclusive and adaptive. Their lived experiences are not just stories; they are critical data points that highlight systemic gaps and opportunities for meaningful reform," Doyle (2020).

For institutions to move beyond performative inclusion, they must adopt relational approaches to policy-making that centre on trust, empathy, and adaptability. This needs us to shift away from compliance-driven frameworks, which focus on checking boxes and meeting legal requirements, to relational, human-centred frameworks that prioritize the well-being of individuals over the preservation of bureaucratic norms.

One of the most significant gaps in current accessibility policies is the failure to account for the intersectional experiences of neurodivergent individuals. Policies are often designed with a one-size-fits-all approach that assumes homogeneous experiences of disability, ignoring the unique barriers faced by individuals at the intersection of disability, gender, race, and class. As Crenshaw (1989) argues, intersectionality is essential for understanding how overlapping systems of oppression shape individual experiences.

In the context of public service systems, this means recognizing that neurodivergent employees who are also racialized, queer, or caregivers will face distinct and compounded barriers that cannot be addressed through generalized policies. Instead, institutions must adopt flexible, adaptive policies that are co-created with marginalized communities to reflect the realities of diverse lived experiences.

Costanza-Chock's (2020) Design Justice framework offers a blueprint for this kind of participatory, inclusive design. By centring the voices of those most impacted by systemic barriers, institutions can create policies and practices that are truly transformative, rather than merely performative, "Most accessibility policies treat disabled people as a homogeneous group. They often fail to account for the ways that race, gender, class, and other social positions intersect with disability to produce different lived experiences of marginalization," Costanza-Chock (2020).

In practice, this means:

- Moving from consultation to co-creation: Instead of extracting insights from marginalized communities, institutions must share power and decision-making authority with those communities.
- Emphasizing trust and relationality: Policies must start from a place of trust, recognizing the validity of lived experience without requiring individuals to prove their need for support.
- Designing for flexibility and adaptability: Policies must be adaptive to the changing needs of individuals and communities, rather than rigidly enforcing standardized procedures that may no longer be relevant.

This study has highlighted the disconnect between policy and lived experience, illustrating how performative inclusion efforts in public service systems can cause significant harm to neurodivergent individuals. By integrating autoethnographic insights, poetic inquiry, and disability justice frameworks, this work aims to reimagine accessible futures that prioritize relationality, flexibility, and systemic accountability.

True accessibility cannot be achieved through top-down, compliance-driven policies. It requires a cultural shift within institutions, a shift toward human-centred, relational approaches that value diverse ways of thinking, doing, and being. As Kafer (2013) argues, imagining accessible futures requires a rejection of ableist norms and an embrace of new possibilities, "Crip futurity invites us to imagine futures where accessibility is not a special request, but a foundational principle of how we build our world," Kafer (2013).

This work advocates for a reimagining of public service systems through the lens of lived experience, calling for systemic transformation that goes beyond performative gestures to create truly inclusive workplaces.

Media 11 - Just a moment - 2004

sitting by the window,
staring out at the crowd gathering outside,
a pit of loneliness circles around me,
as I mentally scream to be free,

Free from all the anger,
the barrier of resistance that I've locked in place,
I'm at a distance, away from you,
and it's all I can do, to sit and wonder why.
why did I let you go, why did I not know,
why am I here tonight, why are you present in this nightmare of life,

help me understand, how I see your face,
in every person that I look at these days,
a stranger walks by, I reach out to touch him,
I don't remember when, I saw you last,
but I do know every second that passed,
keeping time like an hourglass,
checking up on me, where the light at the end of this tunnel,
my rainbow faded away, like you the vividness gone,
for good... you're gone for good.

my arms wrap themselves around me, trying to shield out,
the pain that fell over me,
the stars have all burnt out now,
leaving me alone in the dark,
the glimpse of the past fills my mind,
that dreams are where I draw the line,
there are no more moments,
just time trudging on.

Media 12 - Stewardship in Ages

Pathfinder - in the dark,
The fog rolled in with my youth,
Dimming the winding road to be taken,
So lost, I almost forgot,
But one night I heard you knocking,
It was a whisper in the wind,
Drowning out the noise,
In an instant my suffocation stopped,
As I wrapped my arms around myself,
The sun broke through the clouds and gently said “you are home now love.”
And a new chapter began with fresh pages, linen pressed,
The ink eager for their redemption era.
You and I are yin and yang,
Always waiting,
Shared pain of different perspectives,
Altered brain chemistry from the trauma,
One created drama the other vanished like a ghost,
Unable to mend, there was no host,
Both crumbled and stumbled along the rocky terrain,
But that hurt, it was repurposed, and now they shine for themselves, whole again,
The garden became my muse,
The landscape my canvas to indulge,
I will not plunder, I will reinvigorate,
And give bright life to her bounds,
As the soil heals my wounds,
And I nourish it in return,
Together our art is plentiful,
And the joy reflecting back is the peace we can find on this earth.

Recommendations for Creating Thriving Work Environments in the Public Service for Neurodivergent and Chronically-Ill Employees

These recommendations outline key recommendations for the public service to create an environment where neurodivergent and disabled employees can thrive. These recommendations are based on my personal lived experiences navigating public service structures while managing neurodivergence (ADHD) and chronic illness (ankylosing spondylitis, rheumatoid arthritis, and fibromyalgia). The aim is to offer actionable insights to make public service workplaces more accessible, equitable, and inclusive.

- Rethink "Professionalism" to Embrace Neurodiversity and Disability
- Embed Accessibility into All Work Processes (Beyond Legal Compliance)
- Redesign Performance Management to Focus on Strengths and Flexibility
- Embrace Flexibility and Personalization in Work Structures
- Shift from Performance Management to Contribution Recognition
- Reimagine Meetings and Communication Norms
- Build a Culture of Psychological Safety and Trust
- Redefine Leadership Pathways for Neurodivergent and Disabled Employees
- Normalize Access and Accommodations as Ongoing Practices
- Focus on Equity in Technology and Tools

Rethink "Professionalism" to Embrace Neurodiversity and Disability

The concept of "professionalism" in the public service often reinforces rigid expectations that favour neurotypical and able-bodied individuals. For someone with ADHD, chronic illness, or sensory sensitivities, these norms can create unnecessary barriers to thriving.

- Shift from outputs to outcomes: Focus on what gets done, not how it gets done.
- Challenge masking expectations: Allow individuals to work authentically, without forcing them to conform to neurotypical behaviours (e.g., eye contact, rigid schedules, formal communication).
- Accommodate different working styles: Recognize that productivity looks different for neurodivergent individuals flexibility in communication, workflow, and deadlines is key.

Replace "one-size-fits-all" productivity measures with individualized performance plans that respect different ways of working.

Embed Accessibility into All Work Processes (Beyond Legal Compliance)

Accessibility in the public service is often treated as a compliance issue rather than a cultural value. It needs to be seen as an ongoing, evolving process that adapts to individual needs.

- Normalize accommodations as part of workplace culture: Accommodations should be proactive and part of the onboarding process, rather than requiring individuals to self-advocate repeatedly.
- Adopt flexible work options: Allow remote work, flexible hours, and hybrid schedules as default practices to accommodate energy levels, sensory sensitivities, and chronic pain.
- Provide clear pathways for requesting accommodations: Make accommodation processes transparent, fast, and non-bureaucratic. Remove the fear of stigma or career repercussions for requesting support.

Introduce self-managed accommodation budgets that employees can use for assistive tools (like noise-cancelling headphones, ergonomic furniture, etc.) without red tape.

Redesign Performance Management to Focus on Strengths and Flexibility

Traditional performance management systems are inflexible and often penalize individuals with disabilities or neurodivergence for not meeting arbitrary standards.

- Focus on strengths-based, contribution focused performance evaluations
- Provide flexibility in goal-setting and timelines: Recognize that productivity ebbs and flows for individuals with chronic conditions. Allow adjustments without penalty during flare-ups or low-capacity periods.
- Train managers in disability-inclusive leadership: Ensure that managers know how to work with disabled and neurodivergent employees, offering empathy, flexibility, and practical support.

Here are key recommendations for the public service to create an environment where someone like you or someone with similar neurodivergence or disability experiences could not only survive but thrive. These recommendations are grounded in your lived experience, your work in equity-centred tech, and your reflections on accessibility, inclusion, and representation within bureaucratic systems.

Embrace Flexibility and Personalization in Work Structures

“Rigid systems fail fluid identities.”

Public service structures are often rigid, hierarchical, and standardized, leaving little room for personalization to accommodate neurodivergent or disabled employees. Introduce flexible work structures that allow employees to tailor their work environment to their needs and strengths. This includes:

- Flexible hours to accommodate energy fluctuations (especially for those managing chronic pain or fatigue).
- Remote work options to reduce sensory overload and accommodate emotional regulation needs.
- Task variety and flow-based work models to align with ADHD brains, which thrive on interest-based work cycles.

Rather than expecting strict 9-5 adherence or linear task completion, allow employees to cycle through different projects or choose focus times when they feel most productive.

Shift from Performance Management to Contribution Recognition

“Thriving is about capacity, not compliance.”

Current performance management systems in the public service often focus on outputs and compliance, ignoring the emotional and cognitive capacity of employees.

Adopt a capacity-building approach that:

- Recognizes the impact of chronic illness and neurodivergence on productivity.
- Encourages restorative practices (e.g., mental health days, capacity check-ins).
- Measures impact and contribution holistically, focusing on outcomes rather than time logged.

Shift performance evaluations to focus on contributions to long-term goals, team collaboration, and innovative problem-solving, rather than hours worked or tasks completed within a rigid timeframe.

Reimagine Meetings and Communication Norms

“Neurodivergent people process information differently. Systems should reflect that.”

Meetings are often verbal-heavy, fast-paced, and unstructured, creating barriers for neurodivergent employees who may struggle with working memory, auditory processing, or sensory overload.
Transform meeting norms to be more inclusive by:

- Providing clear agendas and written summaries before and after meetings.
- Encouraging asynchronous participation (e.g., pre-recorded video updates or written input).
- Allowing quiet, reflective participation for those who prefer written contributions over speaking in real-time.

Introduce structured meeting formats where ideas can be shared in writing, and employees have time to process and respond asynchronously.

Build a Culture of Psychological Safety and Trust

“Masking is exhausting. Safe spaces allow authenticity.”

Many neurodivergent and disabled employees feel the need to mask their struggles, adjustments, or disabilities due to stigma or fear of judgment.

Foster psychological safety by:

- Training leaders to recognize invisible disabilities and neurodivergent needs.
- Normalizing accommodations and support requests (e.g., using assistive technologies or flexible workspaces).
- Creating safe spaces for feedback where employees can share challenges without fear of reprisal.

Introduce “accessibility champions” within teams to help identify barriers and advocate for adjustments without placing the burden solely on the disabled employee.

Redefine Leadership Pathways for Neurodivergent and Disabled Employees

“Leadership doesn't look the same for everyone.”

The Challenge is that traditional leadership pathways in public service often rely on charismatic communication styles, linear career progressions, and extroverted behaviours, which can exclude neurodivergent and disabled employees from leadership roles.

Reimagine leadership pathways by:

- Creating non-linear career paths that recognize unique contributions (e.g., innovation, equity work, problem-solving).
- Offering leadership training focused on empathy, adaptability, and accessibility.
- Promoting diverse leadership styles, valuing depth over breadth, and reflective leadership over performative leadership.

Develop mentorship programs for disabled and neurodivergent employees, ensuring they have access to executive coaching and personalized career planning.

Normalize Access and Accommodations as Ongoing Practices

“Access needs are dynamic, not static.”

Accommodations are often treated as one-time requests, rather than ongoing needs that may change over time, especially for employees managing chronic illness or fluctuating capacity.

Shift the mindset from "reasonable accommodations" to "access as a continuous practice" by:

- Regularly reviewing accommodations to ensure they still meet the employee's needs.
- Building adaptive systems that can scale access needs without burdening employees to constantly advocate for themselves.
- Encouraging self-reflection practices for employees to update their own needs in dialogue with HR and leadership.

Create a “dynamic access plan” where employees can easily update their accommodation needs without bureaucratic red tape.

Focus on Equity in Technology and Tools

“Digital accessibility is essential for future work.”

Public service tools and technologies are often outdated and inaccessible, creating barriers for employees who rely on assistive technologies or adaptive workflows.

Ensure that digital systems and tools are:

- Screen-reader compatible,

- Cognitively accessible (e.g., low visual clutter, clear navigation),
- Flexible and adaptable to accommodate different working styles.

Adopt accessibility-by-design in the development of internal tools, ensuring that access needs are built into every system from the start.

The public service must shift from rigid, compliance-driven systems to flexible, capacity-building practices that recognize the diverse needs of employees. By embracing flexibility, psychological safety, and inclusive leadership pathways, the public service can create a thriving workplace for neurodivergent and disabled employees, ultimately leading to better public service outcomes and more equitable systems.

A Post Public Service Reflection on Equitable Outcomes

It’s been ten months since I left the public service. This spring I’m finding balance, joy, and meaning in both my personal life and my work. I’ve had a lot of reflection time to decide how I wanted to approach efforts I engage in. Including how I define what is “good enough” and why we need to do better. I found myself drowning on that front for the last few years of my career as a public servant because I felt so few were listening. At least actively listening and translating it into new actions with any level of accountability or responsibility. So, I stepped back and decided to take a look at the human side of evaluation.

- Why was this happening?
- Why did I care so deeply?
- What were the vectors I could change?
- How could I own the outcome to decisions that were not mine?
- What would matter in the future?

There is a deep need to reshape practices to create a future that include everyone. We can own changes in outcomes that affect historically excluded and underinvested populations by prioritizing these efforts and creating a pathway that raises the bar. People are shaped by the systems that they have access to. This includes products, services, tools and surfaces. Access and accessibility are key drivers of this work.

We have an onus and responsibility to do more good than harm while being mindfully aware that we cannot remove all pathways to harm, bias or the loss of fairness. But we can aim to make strides that do better, both radically and subtlety from humans to teams, from products to organizations.

Titles don’t matter. Well mostly, they don’t. While leading without authority has become fashionable, it leads to burnout, lost hope and transient positions by the nature of the work. These same titles often reinforce silo's in the ways we are expected to work and whom we will be exposed to or can connect with within our organizations and teams. There are many opportunities to instead connect people together through mission, vision or an area that resonates with them personally and in the work that they aim to do.

Delivery can never solely be the strategy. You can deliver garbage, hate, inequity or productivity. You can deliver ineffective, useless or inaccessible products and services that further create a riff with justice and access. The strategy should be about outcomes for people, our interconnections and dependencies.

- Is what we are looking to achieve able to unlock shared intentionality?
- Are we open to continuous discovery and acknowledging how much of the work is navigating ambiguity?
- Does this enable our approaches to be scalable in terms of education and practice?

The space I've made for myself to pause on these efforts, truly look at them deeply and the spaces and environments I have been in has been both rewarding and shone a light on areas where I can grow, improve and change. I'm forever in a space of expanding my worldview. We should be more open to that.

There are key questions we should strive to answer and goals that can deeply anchor us in the work. We need to focus on creating mechanisms that enable collaboration and continuity while we question, unlearn, unpack and relearn the layers that impact outcomes for people who are in and outside the systems we are working in.

Equity considers the needs of individuals. Not everyone needs the same things, or has access to the same opportunities or the same tools. Difference circumstances, situations, environments and behaviours require different things. It's up to us as decision makers, designers and change makers to notice, pause and reflect and seek out new knowledge and understanding in equitable ways that value human difference and the human condition.

If we are to value reducing harm, understanding the levers and mechanics within organisations is paramount of effective, sustainable, systemic change. Part of this is understanding what makes product and service teams tick and how outcomes are truly driven by many seemingly small decisions. If we instead relentlessly hone in on equity centred processes, practices and people, people we can shift the product landscape. In order for this to occur, occur we need to challenge ourselves. Trauma informed processes from decision makers and designers alike will either hold up the pillars of care, valuing lived experiences and navigating ambiguity. These things will not solve themselves. People rely on the perception of a scarcity mindset instead of the abundance of need and impact our decisions have on the world. This could be as simple as what to make when, or whom makes it or how it's expected to be used.

For example, we see this within the walls of the public service when we look and language capacity requirements and official languages. Canada is a mosaic with hundreds of languages spoken and more than 450,000 people who use sign language as their primary method of communication. In the depths of conversations on truth and reconciliation government decision makers opted out of including Indigenous languages in the language bonus conversations and collective agreements. Who is valued, how they are valued and when they are valued changes by the worldview and value system of the decider. Sometimes this is not useful, nor ethical or equitable. Instead, it's the politics of perception. My own personal experience with these things is one of the reasons I have opted to relentlessly pursue equity related issues. Restructuring ways of being, acting, thinking and creating in order to restore and foster trust, reconciliation and collective consciousness. Unlearn it all. This can feel like an emotional rollercoaster. We have to be prepared to navigate the systems that we are in, lean in and out depending on the depth of the conversation and its direction.

I modified a systemic design framework to elevate equity in the conversations that I was having. Systemic change is possible, crafting equitable experiences and products is actually feasible. Much of the approach is about our own mindset and being able to step away from the biases that ground us there.

We are often asked to shift our narratives. Explain in less words. Don't lose the nuance. Reduce the complexity to simplicity, but in doing so there is a cost of lost positionality in the system and the depths of impact on outcomes vs. opportunity and intent can be lost. As a person with ADHD I have to fight this translation of communication for many reasons. Partly it's about losing people in the story and missing the plot altogether but also we tend to dig a little deeper into the meaty layers and that can take significant processing power. If people lack care, focus, intentionality or direction they won't spend the time getting to understand the meat and its connectivity to the system. We are expected to break it down, step back and share only the relevant parts. Who decides what is relevant? Who and what is centred and how much it will drive or derail our impact?

If we aim to de-centre ourselves and our reactions in service of the work we might find this challenging. Sometimes I wish I was a farmer. Then the land and the earth would be my guide. Instead I suppress and emotionally deregulate. I find ways to recharge my batteries because transformative change is exhausting work in a world where the battles are won and lost in small meeting rooms and on Zoom calls in the middle of random product phases.

In a world of open doors,
minds like constellations map the path.
Systems hum with adaptability,
and no one apologizes for being human.

After holding space for countless stories of pain and exclusion, I found myself asking: How do we acknowledge the emotional labour of advocacy work? How do we ensure that those holding space for others are also supported?

Media 13 - Rest and linger

Waiting on the world to change,
Changing my world because this can't be the cycle,
We can dust ourselves off, find peace in the earth,
because the pressure doesn't have to be a mountain,
Monday I try to heal enough to get through the week,
Tuesday attempting to get ahead of the grind,
Wednesday feels like we are on rewind and the jump takes the wind out of my sails,
Thursday I am mesmerized, digging deep with all my love,
Friday slowing down the pace to breathe a sigh of relief
Saturday is a place of refuge but I know I'm about to repeat it all,
Sunday I'm often defeated, crushed by the pace of life,
So it's up to me to find a different path,
Where each day doesn't have to need such strength,
It's okay to not be okay, It's okay to slow down,
This world will keep on turning around,
Every day gives us a chance to rest - we just have to take it.
I get down, I get up, it's goes round and round,
Intentionality is the only way to break these bounds,
Life is more than running round and round,
I'll sit here, wind in my hair, cold on my face,
and breathe slowly for another day.

Connection to Inclusive Design, Redesign for Equity and Accessibility

My lived experience as a neurodivergent woman navigating the public service systems reveals systemic barriers that perpetuate exclusion and demand undue emotional labour in an effort to survive the day-to-day tasks. By telling my story, I’m attempting to centre a perspective often excluded from institutional narratives. I am hopeful that by sharing these stories I am able to nudge public servants, policymakers and stakeholders to cast a wider and more inclusive net in who they are creating seats for at the table, and how they interact within those engagements, conversations and explorations.

This autoethnographic lens models reflexivity, showing how personal narratives can critically analyze systemic failures. This inspires designers and policymakers to adopt a reflective approach in their work, questioning their roles in perpetuating or dismantling exclusionary practices. By examining the disconnect between public service policies (e.g., the disability passport) and their implementation, my work bridges the gap between policy and practice. It provides real-world examples of how Inclusive Design can inform and improve institutional systems.

Inclusive Design emerges in this work as both a principle and a practice one that can transform systems marred by ableism and inefficiency into environments that nurture and empower. My reflections offer tangible recommendations for redesigning public service systems to better support neurodivergent individuals. These recommendations challenge existing structures to move beyond tokenistic gestures and create genuine pathways for inclusion.
By opening the doors for conversation about the systemic flaws and reframing them as opportunities for transformation, this work positions Inclusive Design as a vehicle for institutional and cultural change.

Limitations

There are some inherent limitations to the method and the multimodal nature of this paper. To better understand these limitations, I will use transparency to address potential criticisms and ensure that this methodology is positioned appropriately within the context of academic research. This work does not aim for generalizability or objectivity. Its strength lies in its specificity and subjectivity, but this also presents limitations. The nuance here is that we live in a world where we need to expand beyond only universal findings being of value. The goal is not generalization but rather to illuminate specific lived experiences that resonate across broader systems.

Autoethnography relies heavily on personal experience, which inherently includes subjective interpretations. Critics may argue that this subjectivity reduces the rigour of your work or undermines its objectivity. I feel that this subjectivity provides rich, contextual insights, prioritizing depth and reflection over universal truths.

The evocative nature of this work, particularly through poetry and personal narratives, may evoke strong emotions in readers, including discomfort or resistance. This could lead to rejection of the work’s value or insights. I reiterate throughout this paper that the work is intentionally evocative and seeks to challenge existing norms.

There is a potential risk of over-emphasizing personal experience at the expense of systemic critique, which might lead some readers to focus solely on my story rather than the broader implications. I employed a process where systemic reflections for each personal narrative seek to connect my lived experience to broader structures, policies, and cultural norms.

The reliance on memories introduces the possibility of inaccuracies or reinterpretations influenced by the passage of time and my current perspective. The constructed nature of memory and how it is shaped by current understanding plays a large role. This is why I have included textual and visual artifacts as they are with errors, emotions, and positions intact at their moment in time.

Sharing deeply personal experiences that may leave me vulnerable to judgment, misinterpretation, or emotional fatigue. I am attempting to balance the openness required for evocative work with self-preservation is critical.

Autoethnography and poetic inquiry may not align with the expectations of all academic disciplines. Some may perceive it as lacking rigor or dismiss its contribution to knowledge. I have cited key scholars who have advanced its credibility, such as Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, as well as those contributing to poetic autoethnography like D.I. Hanauer in an effort to address these concerns.

Future Research Opportunities: The Forest Floor and The Pollinator Horizon’s

I believe that this work continues to open the door for more meaningful conversations about accessibility, access and neurodivergence in the Canadian Federal Public Service. This research asks a big question: What’s next for our future gardeners? How do we move beyond gaps and barriers to imagine a future where these systems represent intentionally equitable designs through reciprocity and the cultivation of disabled voices as a network of new roots?

To look ahead I think we need to recognize that the current systems are not fixed endpoints, they are living, evolving entities which are shaped and reshaped by policies, technologies, and the people entrusted to tend to them. The forest floor of tomorrow symbolizes systemic transformation, growth and interconnectedness of all beginnings and systems. Our future pollinators will need to act as firekeepers tending to and spreading forward the lessons of the past so that future research addresses not only what’s missing in the present but will also push us to imagine what is possible if we allow accessibility and neurodivergence to drive innovation.

What if accessibility policies were not reactive, compliance-driven objectives but proactive and relational? What might it look like if accessibility was woven into the DNA of government systems, rather than ad hoc and as an afterthought?

Future research might explore mapping visionary frameworks for accessibility policy implementation. What accountability structures could exist if we prioritized care and adaptability over bureaucracy? How do we ensure that policies are lived for the benefit of people with disabilities rather than just written to be book ends, hurdles and fight creators?

Future opportunities should explore what happens when leadership pipelines are built for diverse thinking, where neurodivergent brains are not just accommodated but integrated at all levels. What policies, mentorship programs, or cultural shifts would need to happen to make this possible?

Imagine a public service leadership council in 2050 led by a diverse group of thinkers, using adaptive governance models that prioritize creativity, innovation, and relational accountability.

The overwhelming need for emotional labour leads to burnout. The cost of self-advocacy harms the adaptability of the public service. What if our programs and workplaces were designed to meet actual needs rather than scurrying to meet quotas? I've seen the same people cycle from one department to the next rarely letting anyone new in from the disabled community because the system is designed to force people on the outside to only gaze inward. What does retention look like when rest, autonomy and adaptability are key functions of the workplace culture? Where masking is not fundamental to survival?

A Futurist Inquiry - Seeding the Public Service of Tomorrow

To push this forward, we must allow ourselves to dream and to cast seeds of equity for tomorrow. Future research needs to be more than just identifying games in the current system. It has to include intentional planning for tomorrow. Broadcasting those seeds for a more diverse and colourful garden is embracing the plurality and fluidity of nature, adaptability and connection.

Imagining futures is a form of resistance. It's more than an academic exercise or a meeting in a boardroom. It pushes back against systems that have historically marginalized neurodivergent voices and envisions a world where those voices shape what's next. I hope that be weaving futurism into this conversation we find new pathways, and create new fields to move beyond critique and into new gardens. If we reclaim the power to change systems that see value in the richness of human difference, embracing adaptability and centring care we might just be able to create something new together.

I write these words recognizing myself as a white presenting woman, with invisible disabilities navigating the spaces between privilege and marginalization. I have my own lived experiences of exclusion, particularly as a neurodivergent, disabled woman, but I recognize that my perspective is not universal. The work of equity is deeply relational, and I seek to hold space for others’ stories, amplify voices that are often unheard, and continually learn from those most impacted by the systems I seek to change.

This work does not seek to be a manifesto or set of solutions, instead, it is an invitation. An invitation to reflect, to question, to unpack, to disrupt, to spark and burn, to build and dismantle, together. It’s a call to keep the fire burning, to tend it with care and intention, and to ensure that it does not burden anyone in the process. The work of equity is ongoing, and we must carry it forward in our own way.

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