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Introduction: Cripping the Arts in Canada

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Many (but not all) of the artists, poets, curators, and writers who fill this special issue, like me, live and work on the traditional and unceded traditional Indigenous territory of Anishinaabe, Mississaugas and Haudenosaunee First Peoples. This land, the Dish With One Spoon Territory, spans what is now known as southern Ontario, from the Great Lakes to Quebec and from Lake Simcoe into the United States and is bound by the Dish With One Spoon Treaty. This is a treaty between the Anishinaabe, Mississauga, and Haudenosaunee people, which bind them to take care of the land. Subsequent Indigenous people, newcomers, immigrants, refugees, stateless people, and settlers have been invited into this treaty in the spirit of care, non-violence, and reciprocity. The contributors of this issue, relate to this land and its treaty from different positions. I come into this treaty and this land as a settler, one who benefits daily from settler privilege and ongoing colonization. As such, I have the responsibility to take direction from Indigenous Elders, communities, and knowledge, such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada’s Report (2015), which in its directives asks us to decolonize our scholarship, archives, and ways of knowing. One of the ways I am trying to take up this directive is by decolonizing my understanding of disability and disability arts, both as a disabled woman and as someone interested in and committed to fostering disability arts in this place we know, through colonial knowledge, as Canada, this place we also know, through Indigenous knowledge, as the north part of Turtle Island. For example, while I experience my disability with pride, and I experience this pride as both a powerful counter-narrative against the medicalization of my body and as central to the formation of a politic that brings me into my disability arts community, I am beginning to understand that this pride is contingent on my recognition as a desired citizen (settler) on this (stolen) land; my rejection of medicalization is made possible because I have access to healthcare as someone living in Toronto, a city-centre with ample healthcare facilities and practitioners. My experience of my impairment and disability culture is likely different than an Indigenous person living in a First Nations community, communities that are often underserved and subjected to environmental racism, whose impairment may have been produced through conditions of environmental racism, who does not have access to preventative, primary, and emergency healthcare due to the abysmal way we treat Indigenous people in this country, and who may not have unfettered access to their land, language, and culture because of processes of colonialism. Many of the works in this collection, most particular in the podcast, *Own Your Cervix*, by artist Vanessa Dion Fletcher, decentre colonial understandings.

Land acknowledgements, like the one I gave above, are fairly standard fare in this north part of Turtle Island/Canada. They can easily be found on the Internet and copied and pasted onto the top of a page of opening remarks. Many Indigenous leaders query the pervasiveness of land acknowledgements, questioning whether they lead us (non-Indigenous people) to develop an understanding of the colonial history of our land and build relationships with Indigenous communities in the spirit of truth, reconciliation, and towards Indigenous resurgence, or if they instead fortify a depoliticized gesture of unreflective acknowledgement. I offer the land acknowledgement above, in part, because this is a special issue called Cripping the Arts in *Canada*. The title, which I choose, reinforces a settler-colonial understanding of this land, a titling which, like colonialism itself, deserves to be unsettled. This title also references how people living in Canada/the north part of Turtle Island have a history of disability arts, one that intersects with disability activism, has a structure of funding the arts federally, provincially, and sometimes municipally, and currently, has a widening public interest in disability, mad, and Deaf arts. All of the contributions in this special issue animate Deaf, disability, and Mad arts as they are created, exhibited, and experienced on this land and reflect a relationship to this land from various positions, as Indigenous people, as immigrants, as visitors, and as settlers.

Cripping the arts

Disability arts, as stated above, are political. Disability arts are vital to the disabled people’s movement for how they imagine and perpetuate both new understandings of disability, Deafhood, and madness/Mad-identity and create new worldly arrangements that can hold, centre, and even desire such understandings. Critically led by disabled, mad, and Deaf people, disability art is a burgeoning artistic practice in Canada that takes the experience of disability as a creative entry point. As the formidable disability scholar and activist Catherine Frazee writes, “Not all disability art is explicitly about the experience of disability. But all of it, I would suggest, springs from the experience of disability and to be fully appreciated must be seen and heard with all of its historic and biographical resonances” (as cited in Johnson, 2009, 35).

Animated by the experiences of living in a world that does not typically desire us, or even imagine us as cultural participants, disability arts specifically mobilizes a disruptive politic. Again, drawing on Frazee, “Disabled people don’t seek merely to participate in Canadian culture, we want to create it, shape, stretch it beyond its tidy edges” (2008). As Frazee suggests, the disability arts community doesn’t want to be included in an ableist world/culture, we want to create something new. This disruptive politic comes through the word ‘crip’ as it is used to title this special issue. The use of the word crip here begins with a theoretical understanding gleaned from disability studies scholars Robert McRuer and Kelly Fritsch’s resembling use of the work. To ‘crip,’ McRuer writes, is to, “expose ways in which bodies, minds, and impairments should be at the absolute centre of a space or issue or discussion get 'purged' from that space or issue or discussion"… (2018, 23). Similarly, but also differently, Kelly Fritsch writes, "to crip is to open up with desire to the ways that disability disrupts" (2011). Taking these two articulations together in the context of this special issue urges us to centralize disability, Deaf, and madness in cultural production, representation, and experiences not only when this centring allows normative culture to proceed as it always has (perhaps the centering of disability would never allow for such a thing) but also, and *especially* when this centring disrupts normative culture. Returning to the words of Frazee, our community/ies want to stretch and shape Canadian culture; ours is a disruptive politic that empowers the re-worlding potentially of disability, Deaf, and Mad cultural production. 'Cripping' was chosen as the animating concept for this special issue because it invites work that identifies as, or explores, disability, Deaf, and Mad art, work that does not align with these (often colonial) identity categories, as well as work that takes interest in the way that the centring of difference in the creation, exhibition, and experience of art disrupts and creates new cultural practices.

What's happening in this special issue?

Thanks in large part to the formative activist efforts of disabled, Mad, and Deaf artists, curators, and arts administrators, disability, mad, and Deaf arts is hot right now (2018) in Canada, in this north part of Turtle Island. Our sector is a priority funding area in the current strategic plans for the Canada Council for the Arts (2016) and the Ontario Arts Council (2014) and this support, to varying degrees, is leading to an invigoration of artistic production, an increasing interest in programing disability, mad, and Deaf arts across sectors, and resultantly, greater public exposure to our cultural production and practices, our communities, and, hopefully, our politics. Not all Deaf, disability, and Mad artists identify as political artists, of course. However, I argue that our arts community en masse is political for the ways that we are disrupting and creating new representations of embodied difference and encountering culture, and, correspondingly, contributing to the advancement of disability rights and justice. Disability, Deaf, and mad arts is a political project and so in this time of increased enthusiasm for our work, we have to remain vigilant about how our work is being engaged with. As we often say, our art cannot be separated from our politics.

Successfully bringing together disability studies with disability cultural production requires a tremendous amount of thoughtfulness and astute connections with our cultures. During an artist talk in 2015, disability artists and curator Geoff McMurchy called attention to the importance of this praxis. He told the crowd that he felt that the cultivation disability arts required intellectual reflection to grow alongside the development of creative practice. As we engage disability arts through such reflection, we must be careful to guard against (and not participate in) the mining of our sector for artworks and art practices, analyzing them for their meaning divorced from the maker's intention or sectoral needs, trajectories, and politics (as goes the history of disability art). That being said, researchers can contribute to the cultivation of disability arts by drawing important historical connections, exploring critical links between art and the mobilization of intersectional politics, thinking through how art represents disability and embodied difference in new and multiple ways, positing emerging aesthetic trends and curatorial practices, and connecting artists and cultural practices globally. In sort, researchers and artists can collaborate in the responsibility of ensuring that disability, Deaf, and mad art reaches its highest level of social and political impact.

Introducing the contributions

This issue begins with a duel contribution from artist and activist Gloria Swain. Pairing photographs of her exhibition *Mad Room* with a critical autoethnography, *The healing power of art in intergenerational trauma: Race, gender, age, and disability,* Swain demonstrates the role of art in confronting her own experiences of madness and multiple forms of oppression and opening a community conversation about blackness, anti-Black racism, and mental health. Throughout her paper, Swain makes a powerful argument for how disability art can be therapeutic and political at the same time. For so long, art created by disabled and mad people was deemed nothing more or less than the result of participating in occupational, cognitive, psychoanalytic, and otherwise rehabilitative therapy. Such categorization deprofessionalized and depoliticized our art, denying us resources, such as funding and professional development, agency, and autonomy. To gain control over our cultural production, we necessarily and fiercely rejected the claim that our art was therapeutic. Swain's paper, as well as her practice, asserts that now is the time to (re)claim our art as therapeutic (if we so choose). Swain also makes a strong contribution to the field of mad studies as her praxis-based paper reveals the intersectional and nuanced ways that madness and blackness comes together in her body and how racism, sexism, sanism, ableism, and ageism mark her body as a target for multiple forms of oppression. As Swain powerfully asserts, both her madness and her art are political.

In their creative nonfiction essay *Public intimacies: Water work in play*, Petra Kuppers, VK Preston, Pamela Block, and Kirsty Johnston reflect on their communal, creative, and public practice of being in the water together, reflecting on their varied connections to disability arts and culture. Throughout this essay, the authors describe and theorize their experiences of being publicly in the pool, in an aquafit class specifically, together in bodies of difference with different relations to disability. They narrate how their bodies bobbed among and between practices of exercise, dance, and taking care of one another; there's was an intimate queercrip coming together, a political act of communal self-care. Their enacted community shaped the pool gym, a site that is often flooded with ableism, sexism, and queer and trans-phobia. Kuppers et al's essay enlivens and disability arts in many ways: it introduces practices of disability arts, such as the *Salamander Project* whose method of being queer and crip in the water together they follow; it contextualizes their being in the pool together as a performance of disability, one connected to other disability art practices; and this essay itself *is* disability art, as the multi-vocal nonfiction narrative shifts between introducing and theorizing with scholarly themes and concepts, poesis, and life-writing. Throughout it all, this contribution connects public histories of disability arts and culture with new forms of practice, pushing forward the sector while maintaining connections to our past.

Artist and scholar Véro Leduc's essay *Est-ce vraiment une bande dessinée? Langues des signes, déconstruction et intermédialité* engages examples of LSQ (Quebec Sign Language) video comics to explore how Deaf artists use the visuality of LSQ as the aesthetic bases for Deaf arts. Reflecting on comics, video art, and cinema, as well as written and oral languages and their role in informing culture, Leduc's essay engages critical considerations about how Deafhood, Deaf experiences, and the language and cultural practices of Deaf communities are key to shaping Deaf arts and De'via (Deaf View/Image Arts). Most predominantly, Leduc reflects on her own video comic strip *C'est tombé dans l'oreille d'une Sourde*, which she produced with Deaf and non-Deaf members of her family and community for her research-creation PhD dissertation. Leduc guides us through a rich analysis of how research and arts practice come together through the form of the video comic, offering new insight into the connections between language, art, and aesthetics, within Deaf culture.

As in Deaf culture, language is vital to the formations and practices of disability culture. As mentioned in the earlier discussion of the title of this special issue, 'crip' is a reclaimed word around which we mobilize identity, community, culture, and scholarship. 'Disability' is a word that units us, that names us as a people rather than disconnected members of a population (Titchkosky, 2002). It is a word that many of us have claimed in our resistance against other words by which we have been named and known, words such as 'invalid,' for example. However, despite its centrality within our culture, the word 'disability' is often understood in normative culture to distract from our humanity and through this understanding, the word disability is detached from us in order that we might achieve personhood (Titchkosky, 2002). We are told that we are 'people with disabilities,' 'dis/abled,'and, 'differently-abled' people. And, indeed, some of us may identify as such. Our various relations with the words that have named us and with which we have named ourselves, specifically 'disability' and 'invalid' and, more specifically, relations with their prefixes, comes through in disability studies scholar and artist Diane Driedger's contribution. Through two poems, *Dissing* and *Invalid*, Driedger separates prefixes from stems in words we identify with, words we may not identify with, and words used against us as a way of teasing out new associations, new attachments, and, thusly, new meanings.

Approaching the project of disability arts from her perspective as a disability curator, disability activist, and scholar, Amanda Cachia engages a few of her recent curatorial projects featuring Canadian artists with different connections to disability in her essay, *Reflections on access: Disability in curatorial practice*. Cachia reflects on access as a theme central to the practice of the artists in her exhibits as well as to her innovative curatorship. She takes up 'access' both as logistically important to centring disabled people as the intended audience for her exhibition and as extending a creative invitation to think through the many ways bodies and art interact. In doing so, she surfaces access as not straightforwardly (however, importantly) a legislative concern, but significant to the ways we produce culture and engage with each other. Cachia connects ours with other activist art projects historically and contemporarily, thinking critically about how performance art can challenge our thinking about how we identify with disability and how the practice of providing visual description, a point of access, offers new ways of attending to and connecting over art. Throughout describing the ways that she and others engage access throughout their practices, Cachia is clear that although access opens up new, exciting ways for everyone to engage art, it is necessary that we understand such innovation as generated out of cripistemologies (Johnson and McRuer, 2014).

Taking up their ongoing research into reframing meanings of disability and difference through the creation of digital stories, scholars and activists Carla Rice and Ingrid Mundel reflect on the porous boundary between arts-based research and (disability) art-making in their paper *Multimedia storytelling methodology: Notes on access and inclusion in neoliberal times*. In common with how Cachia asserts the centrality of access to processes of disability art, Rice and Mundel interrogate how access was necessarily embedded within their arts-based workshops. They draw out how access was both mobilized and thwarted by the neoliberal climate of the university, where their workshops often took place. The authors use their reflection on these dynamics to embark on engaging broader considerations of how the process of making art, art which seeks to recast meanings of disability and embodied difference through the knowledge of lived experience, is mediated by the political conditions in which we live. As we frame Deaf, disability, and mad arts as a political project, as this special issue does, we position this sector as having transformative potential, changing the ways we understand Deafhood, disability, and madness. It is therefore important to think through how the social, political, and economic climate in which we create and encounter art affects its ability to agitate, as this paper does. Along with giving us an important sense of how art-making and access are affected by the political conditions of this contemporary moment, Rice and Mundel offer keen analyses of a number of the works created in their digital storytelling workshops, which are hyperlinked throughout their paper. Although (and importantly) these digital stories were created in research creation workshops, the authors' analysis considers them as art and do not scour them for hidden meaning, but set them into the broader context of disability arts by thinking carefully about the themes, methods, and aesthetics in relation to this sector.

The podcast by disability-identified artist and actor Alex Bulmer offers a review of Deirdre Logue's exhibition *Admiring All We Accomplish* held at the Tangled Art Gallery as part of a retrospective exhibition across several galleries in the 401 Richmond Building in Toronto, where the Tangled Art Gallery is housed. In response to Tangled's commitment to making all of their shows accessible, and because of her ongoing commitment to access centralizing the disability community as a key audience for her work, Logue collaborated with artist David Bobier to create vibra-tactile sculptural extensions for her videos on display. These extensions turned the videos' audio tracks, which were often attached to the visuals, into vibrations. For example, one video featured a close-up on Logue scratching her teeth against a balloon until it popped. While watching, listening to, and/or otherwise engaging this video, the audience could hold or press up against a pillow that was vibrating along with the sound on the screen. One can imagine, or maybe you've experienced, that holding a pillow that frantically moves as the balloon pops creates a very different sensorial experience to reading the caption 'pop' or a screen or hearing an audio description say, "and then the balloon popped." In this podcast, Bulmer reviews this exhibition from her perspective experiencing it as a blind person who accessed the work through its audio description and vibrating extensions. As she reflects on Logue's work, Bulmer thinks through how it's accessibility features did not only give her access to the work, but significantly altered her experience of it, opening her up to insights about how we experience the world through our embodiments that might not have otherwise been gleaned. Rather than taking as a given that accessible curatorial practices 'make art better,' Bulmer raises practical, conceptual, even ethical questions about how such curatorial practices change art and how we interact with it.

In Indigenous (Potawatomi and Lenape) artist Vanessa Dion Fletcher's podcast, she reflects on the intersection of disability art, Indigenous art, and 'colonial comfort' while reflecting on her exhibition *Own Your Cervix* held at the Tangled Art Gallery in 2016. All of the pieces in *Own Your Cervix* make public, instead of shroud, the act and materiality of menstruation. As you'll see in the photographs of this exhibition and/or read it its adjoining audio description, the wallpaper that covers the walls are lined with a pattern of a cervix printed with paint matched for Dion Fletcher's own period blood; there is an accessible self-examination room with video instructions for how to exam your cervix; and there is a display of 'menstrual accessories,' a product meant to highlight instead of hide period stains on clothes. This exhibit also included *Colonial Comfort*, a Victorian era chaise longue with sections of its pattern stained with Dion Fletcher's period blood and outlined with porcupine quills, both of which disrupt the comfort we expect to enjoy when sitting or laying on a piece of furniture in a way similar to how 'colonial comfort' is necessarily disrupted when efforts towards Indigenous sovereignty are centered. Dion Fletcher's podcast significantly influences the way we understand disability art by emphasizing the capacity for crip cultural practices to make accessible intersectional animations, such as the imbricated ways that colonialism, ableism, and colonial understandings of disability/embodied difference work against traditional knowledges and the responsibility of the crip community to centre Indigenous people, Indigenous thought, and within an ongoing commitment towards decolonization.

The final piece in this issue is a small collection of the many coloured pencil drawings that mad artist Barbara Greene Mann drew at the *Cripping the Stage* cabaret that accompanied the 2015 *Cripping the Arts* symposium, out of which the idea for this special issue emerged. Mann's work, which she ferociously sketched from the front row during the cabaret, celebrates the disability, Deaf, and mad performers that took to the stage that night. Mann was a vibrant part of this community herself and so she sketched this work not strictly from the position of an observer, but as a comrade. And her positionality, which brings with it cultural knowledge, communal understanding, and warmth, comes through in her work. In her drawings, these figures fill the page, they take up space; they are drawn in a way that highlights the performers embodied difference, indeed, these differences inspire the aesthetics of the work; the quotes surrounding the figures are taken from their performance scripts, ensuring that their thoughts, jokes, and prose appear alongside their likenesses. Disabled, Deaf, and mad people have a long history of being put on displays in ways in which we had no control over (Clare, 2001). As Eli Clare articulates, our bodies have often been "stolen" while on display and used against us (2001). Mann's artwork works against this as she demonstrates what is possible when instead disability is represented from within our community, an act foundational to cripping the arts.

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