CANADIAN JOURNAL OF
Disability Studies
Published by the Canadian Disability Studies Association · Association Canadienne des Études sur l'Incapacité

Canadian Journal of Disability Studies

Published by the Canadian Disability Studies Association

Association Canadienne des Études sur le handicap

Hosted by The University of Waterloo

www.cjds.uwaterloo

"We Make Art, Too":

A Panel Discussion on Disability Art and Activism on the Canadian Prairies

Kelsey Culbert
Listen To Dis' Community Arts Organization Inc.
culbert.kelsey@gmail.com

Chelsea Temple Jones, PhD
Department of Child and Youth Studies, Brock University
cjones@brocku.ca

Traci Foster
Founder/Artistic Director, Listen To Dis' Community Arts Organization Inc.
strangefish@sasktel.net

John Loeppky
MFA Candidate, University of Regina
loeppkycreative@gmail.com

Joanne Weber, PhD
Department of Educational Psychology, Faculty of Education, University of Alberta
jweber1@ualberta.ca

Introduction:

On November 28, 2019, a group of sixty or so people gathered in a sunny room at the University of Regina for the *Disability Artivism in the Flyover Provinces* symposium. The purpose of the event was to gather artists, students, and community members and arts organization representatives for collaborative reflection on the state of disability, deaf, and mad arts in the prairie provinces. With a focus on disability theatre, keynote speaker Dr. Kirsty Johnston offered an opening reflection on the different origins and contexts in which the processes of such art and culture-making takes place. Disability theatre, she told the crowd, "is best understood as…making connections to disability cultures comprising a fellow practice, remarkable for its political force connecting to disability rights activism, artistic innovation, and a reimagination of theatre tradition." We are in a moment, Johnston said, wherein Canadian artists are calling for reform.

Below is an edited transcript of a panel discussion assessing the current state of disability and deaf art and activism on the Canadian prairies—and articulating a site-specific call for reform. This panel, titled “We Make Art, Too,” featured four self-described crip, deaf and disabled artists whose work is subject to chronic tokenism and who wished to speak out against frequent casting of themselves and their collaborators as inspirational. Panellists spoke of being “left behind” the more radical, crip-focused urban arts movements and of their struggles to build an intersectional, crip art scene in Saskatchewan—a province whose disability and deaf art scene dots between prairie cities, towns, and villages. They believe prairie-based disability, deaf, and mad art is commonly thought of as less sophisticated than those in other, larger cities. In particular, the panellists deconstructed spatial forces, such as accessibility, funding, expectations of the audience and funders that often present limitations in their practice as artists. Moreover, these artists articulated ways in which funders, audiences, and other practitioners routinely place their bodies under threat of erasure in terms of what is possible and not possible in a prairie context. Through this abbreviated conversation, another space was created in which disabled and deaf artists disrupted tensions between intersectionality, the arts, and disability on the prairies in effort to support a re-imagining of prairie-based praxis.

Panellists:

Kelsey Culbert is a theatre artist, motivational speaker, and writer behind the blog “Looking Beyond Labels.” She is part of Listen to Dis, Saskatchewan’s only disability-led disability arts organization.

Traci Foster is a disabled artist and somatic practitioner from Regina, Saskatchewan. She is the founder and artistic director of Listen to Dis'.

Chelsea Temple Jones is an Assistant Professor at Brock University. At the time of this panel, Jones was a Mitacs Postdoctoral Fellow and *Disability Artivism in the Flyover Provinces* organizer.

John Loeppky is a disabled artist and journalist. At the time of this panel, John was working toward a Master of Fine Arts at the University of Regina with a focus on disability, identity, and solo performance.

Joanne Weber is the artistic director of Deaf Crows Collective and is an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta.

Chelsea Jones (moderator): How does the work of deaf, disabled or crip artists disrupt typical arts movements on the prairies?

John Loeppky: We are so far behind other centres, in terms of what we think about disability culture. We are at the points where places are still saying, 'an interpreter would be helpful, isn't that amazing?' And within the conversations that are happening in our community we are confronting the ableist idea that disability art is not art. We are here, we are making art and we are not here as spectacles. I often say—with my members of my community, it is nice for people to be staring at me for a *good* reason. You want to listen to me. You want to share me. It is nice to be on stage and to be in control of that relationship.

Normally, I'm in a wheelchair running around, and Traci—people either presume that she's my mom, or my social worker. This is art that says, ‘fuck no.’

Traci Foster: We are confronted, quite consistently with two things: what does disability have to do with art? And secondly, anything that we do is absolutely fantastic—because how could you expect more from a company of cripples and crazies? Neither of those viewpoints help us grow as artists and neither of those make room for it to be anything other than recreational or filling space. It does not make room for developing professional artists, doesn't make room for developing professional arts administrators. We spent a lot of time trying not to be distracted by that any longer and making art that speaks to our lived experiences and personal narratives that we want to take further into the creative world, to see how accepting our audiences are of~~f~~ the difference that a Shakespeare play that is going to be presented if, in fact, we all have the deviations that the crip brings to the forefront. Even though, as John said, we are moving forward, trust me when I tell you that for every bit of moving forward we are pushing on a cement wall, pretty consistently and there is no victimhood in this. This is just the reality of our circumstances.

Kelsey Culbert: I often feel that [people are thinking], ‘Oh, good for you for getting out. You get on stage, you actually do that? How? And why?’ I do that to educate people and to show them that I deserve to create and be involved in the arts and be able to demonstrate that. It doesn't mean I'm not able, I'm able. We are all able in fact, so, yeah. We are all able. Of course, I can’t speak for all, but I believe I am able.

Joanne Weber: In the deaf community we have a concept called "deaf gain"—it means what we as the deaf community give to you, the hearing world. It is just not about us. It is about you. When we talk about how that interacts with the deaf theatre or theatre in general, I was talking about how to create a new theatre practice. And it means visual theatre. And how do we use visual cues or things to have practice, we would stage? What do we show you? The world is very auditory-centric, meaning that most people in their life experiences hear. We are the opposite. We use visual aids. Our creativity is first based on our eyes and visual, and hearing second. And I prefer to think about, what do you benefit from us? What do you get?

Chelsea Jones: What could art organizations do to support crip, deaf, and mad arts in the prairies?

John Loeppky: Pay attention to our access needs. It's fear that stops people from asking what our access needs are, and its ignorance and a lack of humility to say: ‘How can we help serve you?’ But we need to stop being scared to ask. I'd much prefer: ‘How can we support you getting into this building?’ to ‘why don't your legs work?’ [audience laughs]. We laugh, but that's the dichotomy we're at. I got burnt out sitting in a lot of those meetings as an administrator; my humanity wasn't acknowledged in those rooms. You're not at the level of these other artists because we conceive of them as professional and you're the disabled person in the corner, why do you want money? I want money to make these things, and any movement we can make forward, with the humanity, I think, from our side as a community to meet people where they're at, calling in as opposed to calling out would be I guess the activist way of putting it, is a way that we can move that forward.

Joanne Weber: It is a lot of work to establish a theatre company. A lot of work. All the emails and phone calls back and forth, the advertising, the finished product, all the practicing, the rehearsing, the costumes, figuring out the props. That's a lot of work. And I feel that we need more support that way. I mean, because I would like to have time on my own to write a play. I mean, I can write, but I feel that I'm forced into this other [administrative] direction because they need that. So, I think we need some more administrative support in order to run a theatre company.

Traci Foster: That [arts organizations] don't have to know everything, and you do have to be humble enough to understand that awkwardness and discomfort is a viable response to what you don't know. We live with that, those of us who are identifying as disabled or mad, deaf. We live with that in our bodies and in our minds every moment of every day in this very ablest, colonized world. We aren't educated in an embodied way to understand that feeling awkward and feeling uncomfortable or feeling discomfort does not necessarily mean you're unsafe. We do not intend to make you feel unsafe by allowing ourselves to understand that we understand our lived experiences better than you do and that we are trying to make space for you to help us move this forward in a way that puts our voices and our experiences first, without costing us our mental health or our physical health through the triggers that the barriers cause day in and day out.

Kelsey Culbert: Just please see me as me. Don't see me as a diagnosis, please. I really think people need to see individuals and what they truly have inside. It's not about whether your legs don't work and hands don't work or you might not be able to verbally communicate. You're a person. You're not a diagnosis. Take the diagnosis away. Look at Kelsey. Look at John. Look at all the other people in this room that declare as a user, please. Just see me for me for once.

Traci Foster: I just wanted to add one thing and that is organizations that are—that we're coming in to talk to, especially when we're coming in to educate about disability culture or look for funding so that we can carry things through, because that is another issue still very present in our province [Saskatchewan], which is the charitable model of the expectation that we work for nothing. Don't have an expectation that the disability that somebody is living with is not coming in the door with them. So the way one communicates or, in its fullest fruition, on a day like today, when I'm not in what feels like a typified mode of operation, cognitively or emotionally, that that should have to change in order for me to show up in your room so that you're comfortable or so that you actually see me as viable or intelligent enough to listen to. Because it's a lot of work to try not to be disabled in order to show up in institutions and organizations in the world. It's a lot of work. I think that is one of the things that has caused many breakdowns in people who have attempted to be inside of this with us or on their own.

Chelsea Jones: What does access currently look like on the prairies, and, what would like it to look like?

John Leoppky: I think access, to me, has a very deep connection with intersectionality between communities. I don't think it's enough for me to walk into a space and say, ‘Oh, there's a ramp, therefore, I can get it and do a performance.’ It's difficult for me to talk about disability culture without talking about the fact that there are so few American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters in this city [Regina] or the fact that the City of Regina cut their funding to allow payment for interpreters so it didn't come out of other organizations' budgets to make that more accessible. Access, to me, is being allowed into those rooms and being understood in those rooms in a way where we're actually listening.

Joanne Weber: I want to talk about access for deaf. Everybody is hearing-centric. So, you get hearing use a different discourse. Meaning you're presented information first through the voice. So, we have to wait for your point. So that means you talk and talk and talk and talk and talk and talk and talk—[audience laughter]—before you get to the point. Oh, there's the point. Okay, now I start to learn. So that is a problem when you access professional development. And it's a problem when we try to learn new things. So, if you provide a professional development workshop, I have to sit there and wait because we don't process the information the same way. So, then what happens is, for accessibility I have to sit down in a meeting all day with hearing people and they just talk and talk and talk and talk, and it takes a long time. So, access means different things for us.

Traci Foster: In the last two years, even before I understood what I was doing to unveil, reveal, support and be a part of crip culture and disability art, is that I began to understand personally, as a woman, another barrier in reality in the world, the truth about it is all of our political right to be safe enough to live in our bodies and in our minds in the way they function. The second thing with that is that inside of there, we need to move at the rate of trust. For those of us who are very sensitized or, our health is compromised or triggered very easily in all kinds of ways in these anomalous bodies and minds, we need to be able to move at the rate of trust, which is different than people who don't need that. I feel we all need that in the world, humbly, but in my case and in the case of many whom I work very closely with, and interdependently with in this movement, that is one of the most foundational aspects that we look for, I think.