



## Editors' Introduction

# Cripistemologies of Disability Arts and Culture: Reflections on the Crippling the Arts Symposium

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In 2014, in the introduction to their special issue of the *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*, Merri Lisa Johnson and Robert McRuer introduced the field of disability studies to the concept of *cripistemologies*. As described by Johnson and McRuer, although there are many different ways of knowing disability that circulate throughout our culture, epistemologies of disability generated outside of disability experience, community, and activism are the most legible and lucrative within a neoliberal culture, and therefore most readily taken up (2014, p. 128). Disability studies, disability activism, and disability arts and culture as imbricated movements led by and for disabled people that advance a disability politic, centre meanings of disability that are generated through Deaf, disabled, and mad people's experiences and knowledge. These ways of knowing disability are succinctly expressed through the term "cripistemology," which refers to knowing, and not knowing, disability

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ISSN: 1911-4788



through disability experiences as these are understood by and for disability communities (2014, p. 127).

When Johnson and McRuer introduced the term *cripistemology*, they were not simply naming well-established practices of understanding concepts of disability through individual and collective experiences. Rather, they were drawing on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's 1990 influential analytic, the "epistemology of the closet," wherein epistemology is always bound to a crisis (2014, p. 131). Johnson and McRuer assert that there are many crises to which *cripistemologies* are bound: from how global health crises impact disabled people (Johnson & McRuer, writing in 2014, refer to the HIV/AIDS pandemic and we, writing in 2020, refer also to the COVID-19 pandemic); to how poverty and unsafe low-wage labour produce impairments, debility, and greater susceptibility to communicable disease (Puar, 2017); and to how state-sanctioned violence disproportionately causes impairments within Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) communities (Rice et al., forthcoming 2021). Police violence, provoked by intensifying anti-Black racism under pandemic conditions that have exacerbated already massive social inequities offers a potent example of how the social category of "expendable people" is produced through racist, colonial, and ableist logics that disproportionately affect BIPOC Deaf, disabled, and mad people (Johnson & McRuer, 2014, p. 134-135).

By calling attention to how the meaning of disability is, in part, formed through experiences of crises, *cripistemologies* invite us to move past dominant ways of knowing disability, both within mainstream culture, as well as within mainstream disability movements (Johnson & McRuer, 2014, p. 131). *Cripistemology* therefore "expands the focus from physical disability to the sometimes-elusive *crip* subjectivities informed by psychological, emotional, and other invisible or undocumented disabilities" (p. 134) or *bodymind* non-normativities that evade and remain unintelligible through western knowledge regimes. In so doing, *cripistemologies* invite us to think about disability, and its socio-political and cultural manifestations and subsequent implications, through perspectives of "characters not easily legible within the identity-based or nationalist terms that characterize the disability rights movement" (p. 129). At the same time as they determine epistemological perspectives, *cripistemologies* challenge the notion that disability is a fully knowledgeable subject or object of knowledge (p. 130). Indeed, Johnson and McRuer suggest we orient to disability through a sense of not-knowing, thereby working against the ableist notion of "disability expertise," which presumes that disability is an experience that can be understood through empirical, and often medicalized regimes of knowledge (2014, p. 131).

Following Johnson and McRuer's foundational work on ways of knowing disability, this collection captures reflections on and analyses of disability arts and culture in Canada from various *cripistemological* perspectives. We contribute to a growing body of scholarship which engages disability arts,

and its connection to social justice, through the critical perspective of disability studies (Abbas, et al., 2004; Chandler & Ignagni, 2019; Decottignies, 2016; Gorman, 2007; Kuppers, 2014; Orsini & Kelly, 2016; Rice et al., 2015, 2017; Ware & Sweeney, 2014). We use “disability arts” as an umbrella term to refer to art created by people who identify as D/deaf, disabled, mad, neurodiverse, and/or spoonie, and Indigenous peoples who identify with a decolonized understanding of embodied and enminded differences, as well as those whom medical diagnosis and pathologies have been thrust upon (Manning, 2018; Rice et al., forthcoming 2021). Disability arts, which advances a disruptive, anti-assimilationist politic (Gorman, 2007; Hamraie, 2017), has always been a political project connected to disability studies, rights, and justice (Abbas et al., 2004).

We take up disability arts, as well as access to arts and culture, as matters of social justice. Integral to these overall justice-based projects, disability arts has the power to represent disability as a socio-political experience, one that intersects with other social identities, communities, and experiences of oppression and resistance. When representations of disability and difference are propelled into the public sphere through exhibitions, art reviews, curriculum, scholarly papers, and special issues, like this one, they can change the ways embodied and enminded difference is understood, and how disabled, Deaf, mad, and neurodivergent people are treated and experience everyday life (Chandler & Rice, 2013; Creative Users, n.d; Jones, 2012; Rice et al., 2018; Springgay, 2008). Within these discussions of disability arts, the authors refer to “disability aesthetics” – an aesthetic orientation that recognizes disabled forms as satiating, provocative, and integral to culture in ways that do not rely upon traditional, hegemonic frameworks of beauty (Seibers, 2015, 2017). We also take up “crip cultural practices” – practices of creating, producing, and experiencing arts and culture developed, elaborated on, and shared within disability communities, which anticipate and centre disability experiences (Chandler, 2019).

The contributors to this special issue participated in the *Crippling the Arts Symposium*,<sup>1</sup> a conference held in January 2019 at the Harbourfront Centre in Toronto, Canada, that brought together key stakeholders in disability arts, including artists, curators, academics, arts council officers, and other members of the disability community. Through panels, keynotes, workshops, artistic programming, as well as less formal “hallway conversations,” communities came together to engage in dialogues about how Deaf and disability arts and activism changes how we experience art, culture, and

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<sup>1</sup> This Symposium was organized by Ryerson’s School of Disability Studies, the British Council, Creative Users Projects, Tangled Art + Disability, the Harbourfront Centre, and Re•Vision: The Centre for Art and Social Justice. See <https://bodiesintranslation.ca/cripping-the-arts-2019/>

digital transformation, as well as the ways our culture contributes to, if not leads to, the achievements of disability rights and justice movements.<sup>2</sup>

For example, we collectively thought through disability arts, intersectional justice, and futurity, as Taeyoon Choi et al. and Janelle Rouse present in their dispatches. We explored dynamics of interdependence in leadership and artistic production, and representational politics in arts and culture journalism, as the essays by Becky Gold and Chelsea Jones et al. take up. Another theme that surfaced was how crip cultural practices, such as Relaxed Performances, haptic technologies, access guides, and digital platforms are changing the ways we experience art, and evaluate its socio-political impact, as the pieces by Andrea Lamarre et al.; Mary Bunch; David Bobier and Esther Ignagni; Eliza Chandler et al.; Taeyoon Choi et al.; and Christine Kelly and Michael Orsini theorize. We thought with art, performances, and discussions that animated intersections of Indigeneity, race, and disability, as well as efforts to decolonize disability theory and activism, as shown in both Vanessa Dion Fletcher and Max Ferguson's, and Stephanie Springgay's contributions. Together, these contributions reflect our firm belief that, in order for disability arts' potential to enact change to be fully realized, academics, arts reporters, cultural critics and other cultural thinkers must play a role in theorizing and disseminating the impact of this sector's work to a larger public by thinking with and about disability arts and culture through knowledge mobilization activities.

### **The Contributions**

This special issue begins with a conversation between neurodiverse artist Vanessa Dion Fletcher (Lenape and Potawatomi) and artist and curator Max Ferguson. The two discuss Dion Fletcher's performance piece *Finding Language: A Word Scavenger Hunt* (2019), which she developed in 2018 and adapted during her tenure as the 2019 Bodies in Translation Artist-in-Residence, and subsequently performed at *Crippling the Arts*. Dion Fletcher and Ferguson critique the ways that colonial epistemologies have shaped our understanding of disability. Drawing on her own experience of disability as an Indigenous artist whose artwork and disability is largely taken up through white settler culture, Dion Fletcher and Ferguson consider access and language and offer a cripistemology that decolonizes understandings of embodied and enminded difference.

Andrea Lamarre, Carla Rice, and Kayla Besse's article, "Letting Bodies Be Bodies: Exploring Relaxed Performance in the Canadian Performance Landscape," elaborates on their panel discussion at the Symposium on how

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<sup>2</sup> We are grateful for the support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council for funding this Symposium and its knowledge mobilization activities, including the publication of this special issue.

the crip cultural practice of Relaxed Performances are changing theatre in Canada. Drawing on interviews conducted with participants of the British Council's Relaxed Performance training program in the Canadian theatre sector combined with audience response research and other sources of information (e.g., media coverage), the authors explore the approaches to access that subsequently evolved across the country. Engaging access through the "not knowing" orientation that Johnson and McRuer describe, this contribution suspends assumptions about access as a checklist or as a "solution" to the "problem" of disability, and invites readers to dwell with a poetic tension between providing "access to all" and recognizing the impossibility of doing so. They conclude that this approach may be crucial to transforming performance spaces in ways that make accessibility artful and keep accessible practices vital.

Becky Gold's article "Neurodivergency and Interdependent Creation: Breaking Into Canadian Disability Arts" thinks through the role that interdependent relationships, leadership, and mentorship play in the professional development of disability artists, topics discussed in the Leadership panel Gold facilitated at the Symposium. Grounding her analysis in various examples of art studios wherein adults with the label of, or who identify as intellectually disabled make artwork, Gold's exploration looks at the practices of neurodivergent artists. Throughout her article, Gold proposes that "inter-able relationships" necessarily forge new and inclusive pathways into disability arts, enabling the sector to become accessible to more people within disability communities. She proposes that, in order to invite those on the margins of disability communities in, we must rethink the significance of independence and autonomy to art-making, as well as the conception of, and importance placed on "disability leadership" in the disability arts sector.

Through a dispatch from the field, "Communicating Access, Accessing Communication," Eliza Chandler, Esther Ignagni, and Kim Collins describe and reflect on the process of creating an accessible version of the Symposium's program. The authors think critically about how the access documents contained in the program, itself an access document, expressed an unfulfilled commitment to centre disability experiences and perspectives.

Mary Bunch's essay, "Blind Sight and Haptic Visuality in Bruce Horak's Through a Tired Eye," analyzes the invitation to think differently about visual art, and visuality itself, offered by Horak's exhibition. Through his impressionistic paintings, which were on display at the Tangled Art Gallery in conjunction with the Symposium, Horak explores his experience of blindness. Bunch figures a conception of "blind epistemology" to think through what disability arts, in combination with disability studies, can offer discourses about spectatorship in the arts. Through a "blind epistemology," Bunch accounts for the productive ways disability art, and accessible curatorial practices such as haptic aesthetics, can disrupt conventions of producing and drawing meaning from disability arts.

Through reflective sketches, Jenelle Rouse offers an account of her experience at the Symposium as a culturally Deaf attendee and artist. By engaging with themes of representation, leadership, and futurity as they were taken up in these discussions, Rouse describes the feeling of being in community that occurs when D/deaf, mad, and disabled artists work together to achieve social justice through the collective act of crippling the arts.

Stephanie Springgay offers another engagement with Vanessa Dion Fletcher's artistic practice in her article "Stitching Language, Sounding Voice in the Art Practice of Vanessa Dion Fletcher." Attending to how Dion Fletcher's artwork, including her "Finding Language" performance, also taken up in Dion Fletcher and Ferguson's dispatch in this collection, Springgay animates arts-based Indigenous resistances, finding and reclaiming Indigenous languages and sovereignty, feminist Indigenous corporeality, and decolonizing understandings of neurodiversity. Drawing on Jolene Rickard's (2017) work, Springgay positions selected pieces from Dion Fletcher's oeuvre as claiming Indigenous sovereignty through direct acts.

In an interview with Esther Ignagni, artist David Bobier recounts an almost 30-year history of working in Deaf and disability arts. This dispatch offers an uncommon historical perspective of our sector. In describing his practice of working with various technologies – from music boxes threaded with sheets embossed with Braille, to vibrotactile haptics – Bobier demonstrates how practices for creating and programming art and culture that centre Deaf and disability experiences change our cultural interactions. Throughout this interview, and most predominantly in its conclusion, Bobier positions Deaf and disability arts within broader Deaf and disability movements for social justice.

Christine Kelly and Michael Orsini's paper "Beyond Measure? Disability Art, Access and Reimagining Visitor Experience" reflects on how Canadian arts institutions are affected by the neoliberal demand to prove their value and impact using metrics. Drawing on ongoing research into disability arts using affect theory, the authors propose that being reflective about an organization's social impact, including audience experience, is important; yet it is difficult, if not problematic, to attempt to measure the effect that art produces. The authors propose that qualitatively attending to visitors' visceral and emotional responses to artwork might tell a different, more complex story about the contribution of an exhibition.

In their essay, "Representing Disability, D/deaf, and Mad Artists and Art in Journalism: Identifying Ableist Fault Lines and Promising Crip Practices of Representation," Chelsea Jones, Kirsty Johnson, and Nadine Changfoot detail the Symposium panel they facilitated, in which panelists discussed the politics of representation in arts journalism through the cripistemological perspective of disability, D/deaf, and mad artists and journalists. The authors highlight key learnings from this discussion, including the effects of evoking ableist tropes and objectifying narratives in media, two of the "pet peeves" described in this panel. Jones, Johnson, and Changfoot illustrate the

productive possibilities of reorienting arts and culture reporting as an act of solidarity with disabled artists wherein journalists educate the public about such topics as the histories of disability arts and their political connections and disability aesthetics, which reassign cultural meaning to both disability and aesthetics.

Taeyoon Choi, Aaron Labbe, Annie Segarra, Elizabeth Sweeney and Syrus Marcus Ware's dispatch, "Disability and Deaf Future," recounts the panel discussion these artists shared at the Symposium. Animated by the overall question, "How do you imagine the future?," this piece takes us through the roles of the arts in the creation of utopias, dis-topias, and "dystopias" (Rice et al., 2017). Through their different and intersecting communities, including Black Lives Matter, feminist body-positive online activism, mad communities, Deaf communities, digital communities, and tech communities, these artists imagine worlds within and in resistance to the Anthropocene. This dispatch makes a strong case for how disabled people and disability wisdoms are core to envisioning, enacting, and living into the future.

### **Coda: Opening Crip Spaces and Futures to Difference**

The *Crippling the Arts Symposium* and its generative works contest the dominance of ableist orientations to knowing and experiencing artistic practice, review and commentary that divide artists and audiences. These, and other arts-based resistances, are crucial to social justice mobilizing for the ways they open new spaces and new possibilities for interrogating aesthetic judgment and aesthetic futures, and the normative standards and cultural ideals usually held about such matters.

By adopting a cripistemological orientation to disability arts and social justice, the authors, artists and activists featured in this issue highlight the relationship between cripistemologies and crip space. As described by s. e. smith: "crip space is unique, a place where disability is celebrated and embraced" (2020, p. 273). The challenge and promise of crip space rests with whether and how the design responds to crip subjectivities, which may foster a "soaring sense of inclusion" while at the same time hold space for "awkward conversations" that anticipate and intentionally engage inequities, exclusions, and feelings of unwelcome (smith, 2020, p. 274).

Contributors' critical, creative, and reflexive engagements with questions of access, inclusion, belonging, knowledge, and futurity within disability arts and culture provide the *mise-en-scène* against which disability is enacted and experienced as a social justice issue. They also illustrate how resisting social injustice through disability arts involves problematizing what Jasbir Puar refers to as the "prehensive futurity" (2017, p. 148) of totalizing "solutions" to injustice that erase differences within and among disability communities; such solutions assume injustice is the product of a crisis of universality, presume the desirability of sameness, and bind us to a universal subject and

universal knowledge, which have been motivating forces in western eugenics, colonial violence, and cultural genocide. Resisting injustice thus involves creating space to not know, perform, read, write and feel disability in the ways we already do.

### Acknowledgements

We, Ryerson's School of Disability Studies and *Bodies in Translation: Activist Art, Technology, and Access to Life*, would like to acknowledge and thank the organizational partners with whom we co-produced the *Crippling the Arts Symposium*: British Council, Creative Users Projects, Harbourfront Centre, Re•Vision: The Centre for Arts and Social Justice, and Tangled Art + Disability. We would also like to acknowledge and thank our funding partners: Canada Council for the Arts, Ontario Arts Council, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council's Connection Project fund [#611-2017-1045] and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council's Partnership fund [#895-2016-1024]. Finally, we, the co-editors of this special issue, would like to offer deep thanks to David Butz, whose wise and justice-oriented council guided us through this process.

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