

*Where Are
We Now?*

*Whiteness, Access,
and Aesthetics
of Absence
in Disability Arts*

*/Rachel da Silveira
Gorman
and Jenna Reid/*

Rachel da Silveira Gorman is Associate Professor in the Graduate Program in Critical Disability Studies, York University.
–gorman@yorku.ca

Jenna Reid holds a PhD in Critical Disability Studies from York University and is Artistic Director of Kickstart Disability Arts and Culture.
–reid.jenna@gmail.com

En réfléchissant à notre expérience dans le domaine de l'art handicapé et de l'art fou en tant qu'artistes, activistes, pédagogues ou gestionnaires, nous analysons les facteurs institutionnels qui perpétuent des idéologies racistes et capacitistes dans ces pratiques artistiques. Nous avançons que, tandis que les histoires de l'art PANDC et de l'art handicapé engagé continuent d'être effacées, l'esthétique du handicap peine à évoluer. Elle demeure figée dans la reproduction du sujet blanc handicapé et se limite aux revendications fondamentales liées à l'accès et à la représentation. Cet accent constant sur la représentation, sans analyse historique ni politique, ne fait que renforcer l'esthétique de l'absence, où les corps et les figures handicapées sont vues comme des toiles blanches sur lesquelles le public présumé bien portant peut projeter ses peurs et ses désirs. En mettant en lumière les créations novatrices d'artistes en émergence, nous imaginons les changements organisationnels nécessaires et prôtons un travail relationnel patient, le mentorat, et une refonte de la formation artistique, au-delà des contextes thérapeutiques et élitistes.

The disability arts milieu has expanded in the decades since its inception, yet the fundamental contradictions that were present at the beginning remain. In the Canadian context, the disability arts movement, which emerged in the 2000s,¹ strained under the pressure of massively funded academic research projects in the 2010s—projects with more funding than the entire sector combined. These, along with charitable and therapeutic-focused foundations, continue to dominate the disability and mad arts scenes.² The past two decades have also seen successful advocacy interventions to make city, provincial, and federal arts council funding more accessible to deaf, disabled, and mad artists.³ Yet this very focus on access has served to reproduce whiteness in deaf, disabled, and mad arts,⁴ even as Black, Indigenous, and artists of colour continue to make major contributions to the sector.⁵ The centering of whiteness in disability arts is both a cause and an effect of relegating disability politics to conversations that centre access and inclusion. In this way, the political endgame of able-nationalism⁶ (as a parallel concept to homonationalism)⁷ is the folding of (white) disabled subjects back into whiteness.⁸

Reflecting on their experience in disability and mad arts as artists, advocates, educators and administrators, the authors examine the institutional factors that reproduce racist and ableist ideologies in disability arts. We consider disability arts in the context of the impacts of racial-neoliberal-capitalism and the logics of austerity on artists and the art world. For example, the reduction in the number of artist-run centres in Canada since the 1990s,⁹ and again post-2020,¹⁰ has depoliticized the broader arts milieu, as many of these organizations focused on the politics of gender, race, class, anti-colonial politics, and transnational solidarity. Meanwhile, as we chronicle in this article, in majority-white disability arts organizations, there is pushback against the creation of autonomous space for BIPOC artists by white community members who believe that all disability arts initiatives should benefit them. In the context of white supremacist settler colonialism, demands for “access” are all too often amplified as calls for the reinstatement of white privilege for deaf, disabled, and mad people who otherwise hold a privileged social location.¹¹ We argue that in the most recent iterations of performative Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion discourse, disability arts organizations are increasingly appropriating the language of Disability Justice in the absence of BIPOC leadership.

Black disability studies scholars such as Chris Bell,¹² Nwadiago Ejigu, Syrus Marcus Ware,¹³ Therí Pickens,¹⁴ and Sami Schalk¹⁵ have long critiqued the ways in which disability studies has continued to erase the contributions of Black scholars and continues to reproduce itself as white. A similar process has pervaded disability arts from its inception. Middle-class white disabled artists have tended to make work focusing on issues of access that are more legible to mainstream audiences as disability arts. In turn, these white disabled artists have received more funding and exposure for their work. As

issues of access and inclusion have become more visible as a focus of disability arts, the themes taken up in the work of disabled Black and Indigenous artists and artists of colour are not considered to be related to disability.¹⁶ As the history of BIPOC and politically engaged disability arts keeps getting wiped away,¹⁷ disability aesthetics have failed to evolve. They are still mired in basic demands for access and representation¹⁸ and the reproduction of the white disabled subject.¹⁹ The ongoing focus on representation in the absence of historical and political analysis serves to perpetuate the aesthetics of absence, by which disabled bodies and characters are perceived as blank slates onto which the presumed-able-bodied viewer/audience members can project their fears and desires.²⁰ We conclude by imagining the kinds of organizational changes that need to happen, and call for slow relational work, mentorship, and the transformation of arts training beyond therapeutic and elitist contexts.

WHITEWASHING DISABILITY ARTS

The relationship between the disability rights movement, the uptake of the social model of disability, and the emergence of the field of disability studies cannot be wholly disconnected from the whiteness proliferated in the field of disability arts. The social model emerged in the 1980s in the UK and it contends that disability resides not in the individual who is considered to be disabled, but in the social barriers that prevents the individual from full participation in society. While the model has been crucial to the mobilization of transnational disability movements and the development of rights-based legislation and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the model is also predicated on a white, cisheterosexual man who enjoys full citizenship and access to substantive rights; i.e., the fundamental assumption is that barriers to full participation in society are related to ableism and not racism, colonialism, incarceration, cisheterosexism, or political oppression. In short, the social model directs disability politics toward the reclamation of an unspoiled whiteness, and the sense of entitlement to any white privilege that may have been partially forfeited through disability identity.

Early on, whiteness in disability arts took shape in the centring of a white disabled experience that celebrated disabled identities, fought for access and inclusion in all areas of society, and supported cultural development that provided a sense of community belonging and a value in the (white) disabled experience. Emerging first in the UK in the 1980s alongside the social model,

- 1 Rachel Gorman, "Class Consciousness, Disability, and Social Exclusion: A Relational/Reflexive Analysis of Disability Culture" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2005), 34, 65–68, 81–84.
- 2 Rachel Gorman, "Whose Disability Culture? Why We Need an Artist-led Critical Disability Arts Network," *Fuse* magazine, reprinted in archival issue 34, no. 3 (2011): 46–51; originally published in issue 30, no. 3 (2007): 15–21.
- 3 Jenna Reid, "Crippling the Arts: It's About Time," *Canadian Art*, May 5, 2016, <https://canadianart.ca/features/cripping-arts-time/>.
- 4 Rachel Gorman, "Dialectics of Race and Disability: On the Unintelligibility of Revolutionary Desire," *alb: AutoBiography Studies* 33, no. 2 (2018): 453–58, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08989575.2018.1445597>.
- 5 Alexis Buettgen and Rachel Gorman, "Disability and Culture," in *Culture, Diversity and Mental Health—Enhancing Clinical Practice*, ed. Masood Zangeneh (New York: Springer, 2019): 39–59, https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-26437-6_3.
- 6 Robert McRuer, "Disability Nationalism in Crip Times," *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 4, no. 2 (2010): 163–78.
- 7 Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).
- 8 Rachel Gorman, "Quagmires of Affect: Madness, Labour, Whiteness, and Ideological Disavowal," *American Quarterly* 69, no. 2 (2017): 309–14, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/663329>.
- 9 Clive Robertson, *Policy Matters: Administrations of Art and Culture* (Toronto: YYZ Books, 2006).
- 10 Joshua Chong, "What's Going On in Toronto's Arts Scene? Inside the Crisis Closing Festivals and Arts Organizations Left, Right and Centre," *Toronto Star*, April 13, 2024, https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/visual-arts/whats-going-on-in-torontos-arts-scene-inside-the-crisis-closing-festivals-and-arts-organizations/article_a328aaf8-f5aa-11ee-aad3-33ecca95b947.html.
- 11 Rachel Gorman, "Disablement in and for Itself: Toward a 'Global' Idea of Disability," *Somatechnics* 5, no. 2 (2016): 249–61, <https://www.eupublishing.com/doi/abs/10.3366/soma.2016.0194?journalCode=soma>.
- 12 Chris Bell, "Is Disability Studies Actually White Disability Studies?," *The Disability Studies Reader*, 5th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2010), 402–10.
- 13 Nwadiogo Ejiohu and Syrus Marcus Ware, "Calling a Shrimp a Shrimp: A Black Queer Intervention in Disability Studies," *Queerly Canadian: An Introductory Reader in Sexuality Studies*, 2nd ed., ed. Scott Rayer and Laine Halpern Zisman (Toronto: Canadiab Scholars Press, 2022): 257.
- 14 Theri Pickens *Black Madness: Mad Blackness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).
- 15 Sami Schalk, *Black Disability Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022).
- 16 Gorman, "Disablement in and for Itself."
- 17 Gorman, "Whose Disability Culture?"
- 18 Michele Decottignies, "Disability Arts and Equity in Canada," *Canadian Theatre Review* 165 (Winter 2016): 43–47.
- 19 Gorman, "Dialectics of Race and Disability."
- 20 Gorman, "Whose Disability Culture?"

disability arts sought to raise the visibility of disabled people as subjects. Prior to the disability arts movement, disabled characters in literature and performance tended to appear as “tropes” or literary devices to allude to ethics or morality, or to move a plot forward.²¹ Centring disabled people as subjects in performance has been crucial to the mobilizing of disability rights legislation, as it has been an effective way to generate empathy and to disseminate narratives of disability oppression.²² However, as we have learned from Black feminist philosophers such as Denise Ferreira da Silva and Sylvia Wynters, the positioning of disabled people as knowing and agential subjects hinges on access to whiteness.²³ The legacy of these early disability arts cultural productions has been white-centred narratives, definitions, frameworks, and valuation of disability.

Black, racialized, and Indigenous disabled artists have been creators in the disability arts movement from its inception; however, these artists have been continually written out of the narrative of disability arts. For example, in the Canadian context, artists such as Japanese-Canadian performance artist Kazumi Tsuruoka and Mi'kmaq dancer Frank Hull have been performing in disability arts contexts since 1999, but they have not received support and training to develop their own careers. Instead, other nondisabled arts professionals have received funding to develop and/or direct work that they appear in, even though the material has been based on Tsuruoka's life story, or Hull's movement vocabulary. Mechanisms of suppression of BIPOC histories in disability arts have included white supremacy in western disability movements, and the fundamental whiteness of subject-making in western literary and performance devices.²⁴ In sum, through these processes of white supremacy, the dominant values of the first wave of disability arts movements centred around fighting for representation, access, and inclusion. Parallel to these thematic developments, disabled arts and cultural workers fought to be included in the contemporary arts milieu, advocating at the various arts councils for dedicated funding and accessibility policy. Due to the whiteness of the inclusion framework, this arts council advocacy has frequently coalesced as antagonistic to the advocacy of Black, Indigenous, and racialized artists.

In the contemporary arts milieu, the ongoing impacts of the centring of a white disability culture continues to take up an excess of space. In the Canadian context, funding applications to arts councils at the federal, provincial, and local levels currently provides varying degrees of support for disability arts—at the very least disability arts are now recognized across the arts councils as a valid field of artistic production. The legibility of disability in arts policy and infrastructure has been the result of decades of advocacy by disabled artists, notably by Michele Decottignies of Stage Left Productions. While several arts organizations have accepted guidance from disabled around accessibility and disability identity, most arts Canadian organizations reject the prioritization of politically engaged intersectional work that simultaneously challenges racist, gendered ableism and disabling colonialism.²⁵

With inconsistent funding streams, understanding, and capacity to integrate the field appropriately, one thing is true across all funding sources: priority funding is divided up by identity markers. In the best-case scenario, identity-based funding can ensure that historically under resourced communities have priority access to funding. However, in the case of disability, identity-based funding reifies the dominance of a white disabled subject. For example, when applying to the Canada Council for the Arts, an artist with

21 Ato Quayson, *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

22 Petra Kuppers, *Studying Disability Arts and Culture: An Introduction* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017).

23 See Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007);

and Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, after Man, Its Overrepresentation – An Argument,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257–337.

24 For more on this see Rachel Gorman, *Class Consciousness*.
25 Decottignies, xviii.

a disability arts profile cannot apply for Indigenous funding even if they have identified within their profile that they are Indigenous. This binary thinking goes beyond individual identity to effect organizational funding and mandates. For another example, an organization can have a disability arts profile; however, since there are no operating funds specifically for disability arts, organizations have to apply for operating funding for a particular style of art (i.e., visual arts, dance etc.).

The centering of white disabled identity has led to a hyper-focus on white disabled bodies, access to privilege, and inclusion in mainstream cultural institutions as pivotal aesthetic markers and dominant curatorial and arts programming practices across the field of disability arts. Artists and curators who focus on anti-racist, anti-colonial, and/or class solidarity end up being illegible to disability arts funding streams and mainstream disability arts organizations.²⁶ This contradiction is not surprising when one considers the ways in which white disability inclusion relies on the upholding of white supremacy and Canadian settler colonialism.

The Disability Justice movement, centred in BIPOC and queer disabled cultural production in the US, provides a compelling recentring of disability toward the ways in which structural racism, colonialism, and cisheteropatriarchy coalesce as disabling forces in the lives of racialized and gendered oppressed peoples.²⁷ Celebrated performance group Sins Invalid, along with author and public speaker Mia Mingus, have taken a leadership role in defining and educating on the Disability Justice model.²⁸ From its founding in 2005, Sins Invalid has been a performance troupe that centres the creative expression and experiences of Black, racialized, and Latinx disabled artists. However, while their work is often referred to in academic discussions of Disability Justice (DJ), these references can border on the tokenistic, as their DJ principles have not been centred in the broader disability arts and culture milieu. Indeed, in the Canadian context, DJ-compatible principles are being nurtured in organizations that define themselves primarily as queer of colour, and not as disability arts organizations. An outstanding example of DJ in the arts is Ill Nana Diverse City Dance Company and their Right to Dance Training model.²⁹ The Canadian disability arts milieu has an enormous amount to learn from this organization, and its founders Sze-Yang Ade-Lam, Raven Ade-Lam, and Kumari Giles, who have prioritized disability justice, and body-affirming approaches to dance education and creation. By centring anti-racism, anti-cisheteropatriarchal, and anti-classist embodied politics, Ill Nana has created a dance pedagogy that is far more radically inclusive than “mixed-ability” approaches to dance, which only address surface-level inclusion, and which therefore only succeed in welcoming white, middle class, and heteronormative disabled dancers.

Inevitably, as calls for diversifying disability arts mirror the broader corporate interest in EDI (Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion), we see that whiteness remains at the centre.³⁰ Historic parallels include white womens’ and trade unionist movements of the 1990s calling for racialized people and gender minorities to “join them,” rather than embarking on much-needed political and ethical transformation. Instead of approaching our curation and programming through understandings of disability that are epistemologically otherwise from the dominant approach, we take a neoliberal, EDI-based approach to the issue,

26 See, for example, the important ongoing work of Stage Left Productions: <https://stageleftists.weebly.com/>; and Friendly Spike Theatre Band: <https://stageleftists.weebly.com/>. These two disability arts organizations are among the first in Canada, yet their work and leadership does not receive the attention they deserve in the disability arts milieu and beyond. The first author (Rachel) has also had to shift their work away from disability arts and into transnational arts to remain legible. Their archive is available at <http://www.revolutionaryforms.org/>.

27 For more on these processes, see Gorman, “Disablement in and for Itself.” *Somatechnics* 6.2 (2016): 249-261.

28 See <http://www.sinsinvalid.org>

29 See <https://illnandcdc.com/>; and <https://illnandcdc.com/dance-education>.

30 For a critique of EDI in the arts sector, see Lise Ragbir, “I Was a Museum’s Black Lives Matter Hire,” *Hyperallergic*, March 2, 2023, <https://hyperallergic.com/804872/i-was-a-museums-black-lives-matter-hire-eunice-belidor/>.

which sees arts administrators turn to representation, superimposing diversity as a tokenistic add-on. This tokenization of BIPOC disabled artists erases cultural production that exists outside of the white colonial gaze and only superficially shifts what is seen and valued as disability arts. In this way, disabled artists continue to be relegated to conversations that centre access and inclusion—as if the conditions for us being in the room are the entirety of our creative engagement with the world. White disabled experience is maintained as one that is both palatable and legible to the cultural norm while restricting BIPOC disabled cultural contributions.

The contemporary arts milieu—both inside the movements of disability arts and beyond—has so far failed to approach disability arts in a way that might make room for a multiplicity of movements. Learning from artist activists Sins Invalid, we can see the creation of Disability Justice as being rooted in a politic of disability that necessitates an intersectional approach to organizing and cultural production. Learning from authors Jaffee and John,³¹ we can also see disability rooted in Indigenous epistemologies as a relation emerging through historical and ongoing colonial violence perpetrated by white colonial settler states. Addressing the erasure of BIPOC disabled arts within the contemporary arts milieu requires more than “adding in” more diverse representations of disability. It requires us to open, question, and complicate our understanding of disability culture. Too many white arts administrators approach representation as a “checkbox” process of programming a broader diversity of identities. They see the goal and outcome as including bodyminds that look different from theirs. A more important task that awaits us is making space for contradictions and messiness. When Jenna, the second author, programs BIPOC Autonomous space, she is careful not to appropriate teachings; she respects teachings that are offered to her, but it isn’t her job to lead with those teachings. Part of our work is to resist massive institutions. One of the most egregious characteristics of large disability arts organizations and projects is the tendency toward colonial takeover of the field. White privileged directors can obliterate the field through conquest, leaving no space for dissent or alternatives. Diversity is often “managed” within large projects and organizations in ways that prevent leadership or organizational transformation, and in ways that encourage diverse participants to follow the organizational or project mandate. Rather than continuing to replicate this colonial approach, we could choose to co-conspire without homogenizing diverse communities and artists. We could engage endless possibilities for presenting and creating disability arts and culture.

In recent years, Jenna, the second author, has taken on a lead administrative role in one of Canada’s oldest disability arts and culture organizations. Coming into this role, as a queer, white, mad emerging arts administrator, Jenna was familiar with the organization’s origin story—one that is and has been driven by white leadership. This history, of course, shapes the legacy of the organization, informing how it has contributed to the very history that this article critiques. Knowing this history and understanding the impact that it has on the sector at large, a central goal has been to sit in constant dialogue with this history while working towards change. It matters to note that, at the time Jenna joined the organization, the world was experiencing major shifts in social context as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and witnessing the unmistakable demands of addressing the ongoing violence that Black and Indigenous communities experience in all areas of life. In the arts sector the response looked like: the stated commitment to diversity hires, a focus on programming and resourcing BIPOC artists and cultural workers, and a growing awareness of the necessity of dealing with both the overt and covert racism within all levels of the field.

31 Laura Jaffee and Kelsey John, “Disabling Bodies of/and Land: Reframing Disability Justice in Conversation with Indigenous Theory and Activism,” *Disability and the Global South* 5, no. 2 (2018): 1407–429.

On the surface, any work that purported to support justice, equity, and diversity initiatives appeared to be resourced and celebrated. This EDI zeitgeist benefitted an administrator like Jenna: white, well educated, and politically engaged in racial justice. Jenna was encouraged to do her work in a way that aligned with the mentorship she received through her activist engagements. As both the pandemic and calls for racial justice continued, Jenna, as a white administrator, still receive surface-level support, while the very opposite has been true for many BIPOC artists and administrators – many who have been harmed by systems, institutions, and colleagues who refused to grasp the work required to address white supremacy rampant in the arts milieu.³²

While Jenna felt her work was superficially supported and rewarded, there is no question that there was also a significant amount of pushback. She regularly received comments from white disabled artists who feel that much of her programming does not include or represent them. This is a fascinating position to take, considering that many of these white disabled artists feel that they represent the broader disability community, yet they refuse to see themselves in their BIPOC disabled colleagues. Jenna's efforts to address the erasure of BIPOC excellence within the field of disability arts has little if anything to do with representation and inclusion. While a core element of how Jenna shifted the artistic vision of the organization is to resource BIPOC autonomous spaces, the goal is not simply to *see* more diversity. In supporting BIPOC artists and cultural workers, the primary goal is to *do* things differently; to be shifting the lens and framework completely. While they are not her teachings to give, nor her frameworks to own, Jenna learned through Indigenous scholarship that this work is relational, and often in tension with inclusion (as in, not all spaces are meant to be accessible to all bodies). As settlers, we should take care to know the teachings and histories of the lands we are on; to the original peoples; to have a humility; to know that you will get things wrong; and to be aware of our own traditions and ways of being.

And so, when we program, perhaps we should think less about “how do we present artists and artwork that is more diverse?” and more about “what are the different stories that have been eclipsed and erased?” It is important to remember that the eclipse and erasure is an active and purposeful endeavour, not an innocent passive mistake. To *do* things differently we have to meaningfully support dissent within our arts spaces. White co-conspirators must recognize that they are not always meant to be in a space, or part of a project, and they are certainly not always the expert.

Expected white pushback to transformation in the organization has included: white artists claiming that they are losing opportunities; unwillingness to directly address racism; community gossip disparaging the work; and white arts administrators refusing support for the organization because they do not see themselves reflected in the work. Most distressing is how tightly white disabled artists and arts administrators cling onto the notion of access. Access has been the space in which white disabled people have claimed expertise, and which they operationalize to center themselves. In doing so, white disabled artists, cultural workers, and arts administrators continue to: race to the bottom of the oppression matrix; claim to deserve access to all spaces; and refuse to engage in any relational work that conceives of access as an epistemologically problematic starting point.

Both authors have witnessed white backlash against Indigenous leadership framed as “access needs” in an arts-focused public meetings. For example, at an Indigenous-led public consultation, access was enacted in a relational rather than transactional way. A white disabled artist immediately

32 See, for one example, Ragbir, “I Was a Museum’s Black Lives Matter Hire.”

introduced themselves as an expert in access consultancy and then to proceed to indicate ways in which the Indigenous facilitator was “getting access wrong.” In another example, an Indigenous facilitator spoke about the extractive character of white listening and learning. To be in better relationship in the space, the facilitator asked participants to put away their notebooks. A white disabled person stormed out of the meeting, declaring that their access needs were being denied. These violent engagements exemplify the essence of the impacts of a white disability lens on the field: access is defined and mobilized as a weaponized reclamation of white colonial privilege.

FROM ACCESS AND REPRESENTATION TO AESTHETICS

The unrelenting focus on representation and access within the field of disability arts has wide-ranging impacts. White disabled experiences and knowledge sit at the very heart of the disability rights framework. The premise of the rights-based approach has long been critiqued for serving those who are most palatable, legible, and privileged within our disabled communities. And yet, with little capacity to think otherwise, we continually use this as our starting point in a way that leaves us stuck in the very issue that this framework is wholly unable to address: the racism rampant within our own organizing. As a result, the starting point for many disabled community members is an exploration of their identity and lived experience through a framework of disability rights, centring on the concepts of representation, access, and inclusion.

Representation and access can be seen as canonical goals in disability arts and disability studies. At the root of these goals is the idea that it matters to see yourself reflected in cultural spaces and ephemera, and that this reflection co-constitutes value and belonging. It is difficult to argue against these goals. However, just because an idea offers a way to move towards social change, does not mean that this idea will lead us directly to material change. There are important lessons for us to learn about when our efforts have run their course, led us astray, or caused harm, and when they have been co-opted or operationalized to maintain power within the ruling class.

There are many ways in which the goals of representation and access enter the arts milieu in a well-intentioned effort to address elitism. Notably, the history of Outsider Art—a field that directly impacts many communities of marginalized artists—exemplifies many of the problems of seeking representation and access without changing social hierarchies and power structures. Outsider Art is a field of art that predates disability arts. Outsider Art as a concept was created by formally trained white male artists and cultural workers as a way to address issues of elitism within the formal art world.³³ In some ways, Outsider Art had the goal of increasing representation of mad, disabled, poor, incarcerated, and BIPOC artists by bringing them adjacent to the canon of professional artists. In the process of bringing these artists into the art world, their inclusion was based not on aesthetic markers, nor on skill or training, but on their identity as *outsiders* to the dominant culture. Through the creation of this field, arguably, representation shifted in many ways. Some things changed, including which artists and what kinds of art were being curated and shown. Other things did not change, including who was in control of framing and defining what was considered art, how the art was curated and presented, how the art world engaged with the work, and who had access to training and positions of power within the art world.

Arguably, Outsider Art is the hamster wheel of representation and access at the core of disability arts. Creating relatively superficial changes

33 C. Tansella, “The Long and Winding Journey of Outsider Art: An Historical Perspective,” *Epidemiology and Psychiatric Sciences* 16, no. 2 (2007): 133–38.

in whose work is shown in the arts milieu does not open space to address the deeper issues created through histories and ongoing practices of colonialism and white supremacy within the field. Representation and access have become the proverbial carrot that we chase after: continually reinventing these practices; inadvertently and inappropriately aiming to perfectly represent, include, and provide access for all; and failing to see that focusing on self-representation as the pinnacle of our contribution to the artworld maintains the power and privilege of, and control by, the dominant ruling class.

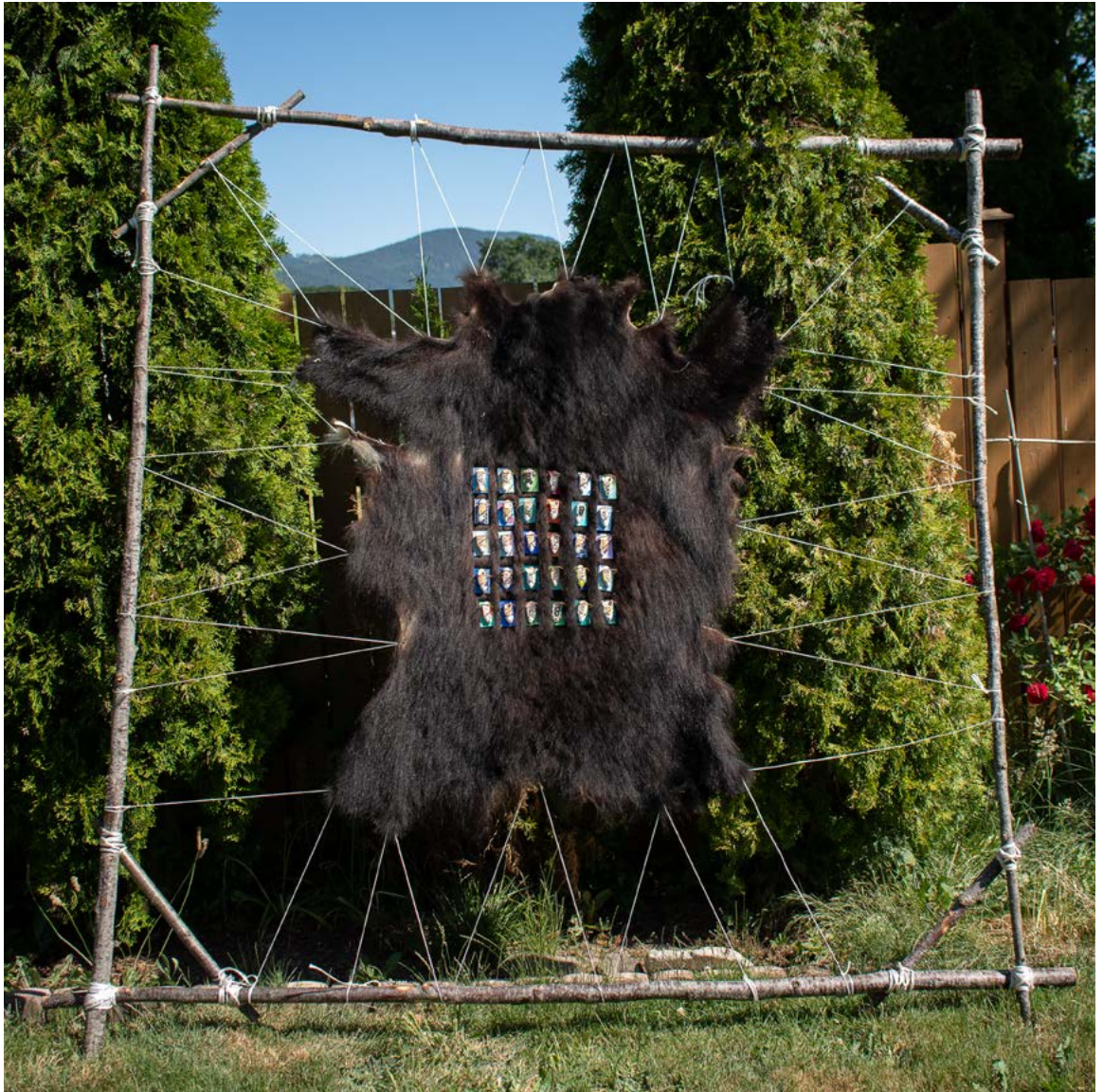
THE PROBLEM OF THE ACADEMIC TAKEOVER OF DISABILITY ARTS

The reproduction of whiteness is a fundamental structural feature in a settler colony such as Canada. Whiteness cannot remain at the centre of Canadian social life, material culture, and political economy without the daily interventions by the legal, medical, educational, and governance systems. Whiteness would not remain at the centre of disability arts without the institutional reproduction of whiteness in academia, arts funding, and social services. So far, we have been discussing the social relations of disability art in the arts sector. However, the massive expansion of generously funded arts-based research projects conducted by non-artists, and the tensions between the clinical study of disability and the development of critical disability studies has opened important spaces for the practice of arts-based methodologies in academic research. This proliferation of arts-based products has, in turn, helped to reproduce a focus on access and inclusion, and therefore, whiteness, in disability arts.

The tension between academic institutions and the negative impacts of research on marginalized communities, especially Black and Indigenous communities, has been widely criticized. Harmful aspects of research practices include how the research is done, who is doing the research, who has control over the research, and who benefits from the research. Large-scale funded research projects have an additional dimension of power, similar to funded arts institutions—there is little room for dissent when research projects become a source of employment for emerging scholars and artists, as dissent can threaten the livelihood of anyone who does not toe the party line. So, what happens when Canadian research centres position themselves as authorities on disability arts and culture while also positioning themselves as a major funding resource for activists and justice seeking communities?

It is telling that disability arts did not transition into academia via fine arts programs, which would be the appropriate entry point, but rather through social sciences and health programs. To compare the disciplining of arts practices that emerged in social movements, feminist performance art entered academia in Canada via feminist performance artists who created relevant courses and even redefined program streams within art schools like OCAD University. In contrast, with a few notable exceptions, disability arts became an object (rather than subject) of academic study. Specifically, disability art is not taught as a studio course in arts schools; rather it is a special topics course taught in programs such as Disability Studies or Rehabilitation Sciences. Despite the explosion of disability studies scholarship, and the expansion of disability-identified scholars graduating from disability studies programs, disability is still seen as the purview of health and helping professions.

Combined with the problem of institutionalized research is a legacy of arts-based research methods that have overwhelmingly been developed and implemented by non-artist academics. These practices are very much research methodologies first and are, at best, only arts practices in the most superficial sense. Indeed, arts-based methodologies emerged as a technique of engaging over-researched communities. These methodologies emerged through struggles to democratize research, such as participatory action



/fig. 1/ Adele Lⁿb·r^oΔ·nq·o Arseneau, *kaskitew maskwa Sooke*, 2023. Alum tawed bear hide (gifted from settler on T'Sou-ke land). wāspison's (mossbags): smoke-tanned deer hide beaded with contemporary and antique beads, hand sewn antique HBC blanket swaddling cloths with hand carved wood baby figurine. tihkinākan (cradleboards): hand carved alder with bent willow bush bar, hand painted with acrylics. Photo: Christine Gorchinsky.

research.³⁴ However, due to the structural barriers in place at academic institutions and funding agencies, arts-based projects tend to increase community participation without increasing community ownership or decision-making over the research questions, recommendations, and outcomes.³⁵

In addition, as arts practices, these arts-based methods are often imparted to research participants without any of the critical and reflexive pedagogy that accompanies formal conservatory-based or university-based fine arts training. This pedagogical deprivation is even more pronounced when we consider that the research participants have been systematically excluded from formal fine arts training. In this way, art-based research projects function as a contemporary generator of Outsider artists, yet even further removed from the art world, because the techniques they are learning do not qualify as fine arts, and the work is not showable in fine arts contexts. The hyper-focus on a research method as an entry point into disability arts, and as a point of emergence for disability arts in Canada, is an important driver for the “stuckness” we are experiencing as a field. For example, digital storytelling has become a method of choice for contemporary arts-based research on disability identity. Rather than training participants in visual arts more broadly and supporting participants to choose an artistic approach to express their own experience, participants are trained to produce a formulaic narrative arc about what their disability identity means to them. While on the surface, digital storytelling seems to be a more democratized approach to social research, the narrative arc has been pre-determined, and opportunities for self-expression are therefore narrowed.

Digital storytelling also attempts to present a research methodology as professional art, and positions non-artist academics as having the most control and seeing the most benefits from the institutionalizing of the practice. Through academics accessing substantial federal research grants and distributing the money to non-artist research assistants and to computer and AV lab technicians, digital storytelling eats up resources that could go to artists and arts organizations to train research participants to engage more broadly and creatively with artistic media. Further, the narrative arc of digital storytelling lends itself to colonial territory-marking and citizen-making, as it instructs participants to superimpose individualized biographical arcs over visuals of colonized space without a mechanism to unpack the relationship. Third, the practice of digital storytelling has incentivized academics to enthusiastically adopt disability identities, despite their lack of connection to community. Newly arrived to disability arts, these academics uncritically support mainstream disability narratives without the nuance that comes from being a working disabled artist.

From a formal perspective, digital storytelling, with its prescribed narrative arc of individual adversity and overcoming serves to freeze our aesthetic development in time, amplifying and reproducing our shortcomings. It proliferates a white-centred approach to disability arts behind a smokescreen of diversity. Worse, it depoliticizes cultural production and appropriates our community knowledges, placing them in the hands of the powerful elite. Finally, it maintains and reproduces some of the core issues facing our artists and emerging arts administrators by perpetuating a lack of access to provocative and radical aesthetic development. As a result of academic institutions on the

34 For an example of photovoice as a way of including disabled people in social research, see Mandy Tijn, Huib Cornielje, and Anthony Kwaku Edusi, “Welcome to My Life! Photovoice: Needs Assessment for and by, Persons with Physical Disabilities in the Kumasi Metropolis, Ghana,” *Disability, CBR and Inclusive Development* 22, no. 1 (2011): 55–72; and Jo Aldridge, “Picture This: The Use of Participatory Photographic Research Methods with People with Learning Disabilities,” *Disability & Society* 22, no. 1 (2007): 1–17.

35 See Aeysha Vernon, “Reflexivity: The Dilemmas of Researching from the Inside,” in *Doing Disability Research*, ed. Colin Barnes & Geof Mercer (Leeds, UK: The Disability Press, 1997), 158–76; and Sue Hollinrake, Sara Spencer, and Geof Dix, “Disabled Citizens as Researchers – Challenges and Benefits of Collaboration for Effective Action and Change,” *European Journal of Social Work* 22, no. 5 (2019): 749–62.

one hand, and mental health and developmental disability institutions on the other, disability arts is positioned as being largely based in community and therapeutic arts spaces. There is nothing aesthetically or curatorially exciting about someone learning how to produce work through the lens of a research methods workshop; rather, this approach proliferates voyeuristic perspectives on disabled experience.

THE PROBLEM OF DISABILITY ARTS AS PERPETUAL THERAPY

Even more than the academic-industrial complex, the interlocking legal, medical, and social services systems are vital to the reproduction of settler-colonial racial capitalism in Canada. These systems also enact arts-based practices in very specific ways, especially in relation to disability, broadly conceived. Psychiatric organizations are especially implicated in engaging disability arts as a tool of colonialism and incarceration. Referring to itself as the longest running multidisciplinary arts and mental health organization in Canada, Workman Arts was founded by a former psychiatric nurse and locates itself with direct ties to the Centre for Mental Health and Addiction (CAMH), the major mental health institution in Toronto. Creative work made by psychiatrized people is directly tethered to therapeutic spaces, thus reproducing the historical legacies of Art Brut, the practice of viewing the art of inmates as curiosities for the presumed-sane white middle class.³⁶ Regardless of the therapeutic value of art for some individuals, it is important not to lose sight of the role of psychiatry and social work in the reproduction of white supremacy. We reject a simplified review of the impacts of an organization like Workman Arts, or binary appraisals of the benefits versus harm. As an organization, Workman Arts works to reproduce white, liberal narratives of mental illness, specifically by supporting the production of artworks that narrate mental illness as a problem of “stigma” and advocate “help seeking,” rather than seeing mental illness as a problem of historical and ongoing trauma caused by white supremacy, colonialism, and cisheteropatriarchy. Workman Arts shares the same form as other well-resourced arts institutions serving mad, Deaf, and disabled artists: the leadership is largely outside of our communities and their programming takes shape in models that exist somewhere in between social-service day programming and therapeutic efforts, and the programming is housed within the walls of the major mental hospital.

In contrast, Gallery Gachet is a disabled artist-run centre in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside that has historically centred anti-colonial and class solidarity in its programming. These politics are reflected in its description of their membership, which escapes both therapeutic, medical-model definitions and white-focused identity-based terminology. Gallery Gachet centres “people marginalized by their mental health, trauma and/or abuse experience”³⁷ and is led by a diverse leadership team immersed in community-based practices and committed to radical politics. Yet, while Workman Arts is assured of funding through their association with CAMH and their appeal to wealthy donors in addition to receiving arts funding, Gallery Gachet is vulnerable to cuts when mental-health funders fail to see the therapeutic value in an artist-run gallery space.

AESTHETICS OF ABSENCE

We have reviewed the ways in which the triple threat hindering the de-centring of whiteness in disability arts—namely, the disability arts sector itself,

36 See Gorman, “Whose Disability Culture?”; and Jenna Reid, “Materializing a Mad Aesthetic Through the Making of Politicized Fibre Art” (PhD diss., York University, 2019).

37 See “Our Basis of Unity” at <http://archive.gachet.org/about/>.

academic impositions, and therapeutic institutions—keep us locked in individualized liberal representation. Rather than being a space to develop political and social consciousness and relations of solidarity, disability artists are denied agency in our work. The impulse to deny disabled people’s political consciousness is not coincidental; rather, it is part of a historically constituted process that the first author, Rachel, calls the aesthetic of absence. As they have been an active contributor to disability arts since 1999, they can provide an example from twenty years ago, but one which resonates with more recent developments we have been describing. As a mixed race, often white-passing disabled artist who has privilege in relation to public perception of their assumed intellectual capacity, Rachel finds it important to emphasize that aesthetic of absence is based in ideologies of intellectual ability/disability, and the curator described below focuses on artists labelled with intellectual disability. These ideological underpinnings continue to shape Outsider Art for many marginalized communities who have been excluded from professional art education and production.

In a pamphlet distributed at a public art exhibition and performance event, an experienced curator/program director who runs a disability art space described their practice in terms that vividly illustrate the aesthetic of absence.³⁸ The curator’s mission, as they describe it, has been to present the work of artists with disabilities by championing *art brut* (raw art), Outsider Art (a play on “insider art,” which is what 1920s psychiatrist Hans Prinzhorn called the work he appropriated from his patients), naïve art, and a variant of folk art that does not incorporate recognizable symbols or traditional uses. The philosophy of art expressed by this curator contains an implicit assumption that certain people do not and/or cannot make conscious choices about what the content of their art will be, and that they have no conscious point of view about what they are representing. Therefore, while these artists would need time, space and resources with which to produce their *art brut*, they would not (according to this philosophy) require technical training that would help them to clarify and convey their conscious analysis of the world. Implicit in this *art brut* philosophy is the idea that “innocent” or “non-conscious” work will appeal to a “knowing” or “conscious” audience. To this (implied) conscious audience, the work will reveal essential components of the human psyche, or “human nature,” depending on whether the curator is a psychiatrist or an art presenter.

Projecting “non-consciousness” onto the disabled artist, that is, appropriating the artist’s work as something that is unmediated by their consciousness, is the alienation of the artist from their own work. This appropriation also creates a non-consensual relationship between the artist and their audience. Analyzing disability as “un-consciousness” in the visual arts is akin to analyzing disability as “peculiarity” in the dance/theatre arts. In the former, the (implied) non-disabled art consumer can reflect on the existence of a transcendent human nature or psychic characteristics; in the latter, the art consumer can move from pity/fear to empathy and catharsis, through which the moral-physical attribute is cleansed. In both cases, the disabled artist becomes the object, not the subject of their own work, and their humanity is erased and replaced with a trope, or living symbol, whose purpose is to provide guidance and healing to the non-disabled.

This philosophy of disability and art, which the first author, Rachel, has come to think of as the aesthetic of absence, has a particular relationship to technique and technical training. Since the aesthetic tends towards the presentation of an imaginary “innocence,” there is an assumed absence of technique. The

38 I acquired this pamphlet at a public art showing and performance event organized by this curator, who will remain anonymous.



/fig. 2/ Jenna Reid and Cass Myers, *Body All Pearls*, 2022. Documented performance and multimedia installation using poetry, dance, and textiles. Photo: courtesy of the artists.



/fig. 3/ bailey macabre, *wisakitebew*, 2021. Digital painting. English translation of title means “they have a heavy heart.” Photo: courtesy of the artist.

technique that the artist does possess is interpreted as inherent/unconscious mode of vision rather than a conscious stylistic choice.³⁹ As with art dealers who encourage artists to develop distinctive commercial styles, there would be no reason for the curator of this type of “disability art” to encourage growth or development in the artist’s content or technique. Instead, the technical skills the artist must acquire are the skills related to working within segregated arts programming. In programs in which art production is intended as a means to therapeutic engagement, to expect this type of skill development is reasonable.⁴⁰ In the absence of space and opportunity for critical reflection, however, the skills related to surviving segregation do not equip one for artistic expression.

THE FUTURE OF DISABILITY ARTS

As an act of dreaming into the futures of disability arts, the second author, Jenna, reflects on three artists whom she has come to know and with whom she has developed deep relationships in her work as an arts administrator, educator, and practicing artist. Coincidentally, two of these artists are cousins, but this was unknown to Jenna when she initially juried each of their work. The first artist is Adele ᐱᐅᑦᑦᐱᓐᐱᓐᐱᓐᐱᓐ Arseneau. Adele is a disabled nehiyaw/ Michif multi-disciplinary artist who carves cedar, beads contemporary Métis and Plains-style traditional beadwork, and creates hide textiles and digital art. Jenna recently curated Adele in her first solo exhibit: ᑦᑦᑦᑦᑦᑦᑦᑦᑦ *wiskwépitákan - sacred bundle*. In this show, Adele created an immersive installation of sculptural work, including five large hides tanned and stretched across wooden frames. Affixed to these hides in a grid-like pattern were miniature sculptures of babies nestled in the beaded mossbags on handpainted cradleboards. The exhibition invited the audience into a space of intimacy which led to confrontations with Indigenous experiences of colonial violence across Turtle Island. Referencing the ongoing discovery of Indigenous children on the sites of former residential schools, the work tells a story that is not solely steeped in tragedy and violence. Instead, Adele creates in ways that speaks to the worlds she dreams, where community comes together, reclaiming traditional practices as spaces that see disabled Indigenous art as holding the past, present, and future in beautifully complex ways.

Jenna first met artist Cass Myers when Jenna was teaching in a university classroom.⁴¹ She first learned about Cass’s poetic work through their assignments in the course, but also through watching them perform within the spoken word community. Cass has a handle on poetry that opens the art in both function and form. More recently, Cass has taken the performative style in their poetry and applied it to explorations in multidisciplinary art forms. In the spring and summer of 2022, Cass and Jenna created and exhibited a piece of work titled *Body All Pearls*. Developed while artists in residence with Trinity Square Video, we took Cass’s poetry and created a piece of work that engaged dance and body movement work, videography, and an immersive textile installation. Dreaming this world in which disabled and mad ecologies and cosmologies centred the body through a decolonial lens invoked the magical possibilities of the refusal of colonial narratives of disabled bodies.

39 According to popular-psychology thinking, certain sensory states produce characteristic ways of viewing and representing the world – for example, the idea that autistics have a distinct and recognizable way of visually representing the world; or the idea that Van Gogh’s distinctive style was in part a product of schizophrenia.

40 Skills related to working in a segregated setting are also required of people participating in programs in which arts production is limited to the manufacture of saleable crafts with particular uses. For people who produce “crafts” in a work-shop as an employment alternative, this is also an alienating endeavour, but in a different way than the process I am discussing here.

41 My mentorship and teaching centres my students as active knowledge contributors both within and outside of the site of the classroom. Moving beyond a simplistic view of seeing my students as experts in their own lived experience, I instead seek ways to develop relationships that see students as actively engaged in shaping the world around them. In this way, many students that I work with are co-conspirators in activist spaces, regularly adding integral knowledge and creative contributions to social movement organizing.

We end with some reflections on artist bailey macabre. As a nêhiyaw, Michif, neurospicy, disabled, agender indigiqueer, bailey is an emerging artist with a lot to offer the field of disability arts. Making work that fails to fit neatly into any one box—culturally, aesthetically, or disciplinarily—bailey works from a lens of Indigenous Futurism. Their work, which ranges from beading, digital illustration, comics, sculpture, textiles, and embroidery, draws the audience into a story of disability that refuses colonial narratives. In creating work that vibrantly speaks to stewardship of the land, reclamation of traditional practices, and queering aesthetics, bailey refuses to legibly centre disability for a variety of complex reasons. This refusal generously offers the field a futurity that centres disability while refusing to engage a politic of access and inclusion. bailey's work provides a messy intersectional vision that carefully grounds itself in the honouring of traditional knowledge and practices, while simultaneously approaching them as living and changing aesthetic spaces.

Each of these three artists offer vastly different aesthetics and thematics to the field of disability arts, providing us with new entry points to consider the question: what are disability aesthetics? Thinking/feeling with these three artists, we might envision answers to this question that center provocative artistic practices, engage the world in exciting ways, and push us to see what it means to decentre the colonial gaze.