

ARTICLE

*Crippling
Conservation
of
Cultural
Heritage*

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Le domaine de la conservation-restauration des biens culturels est fondamentalement validiste. Cette pratique repose fortement sur de bonnes capacités motrices et privilégie les publications académiques, laissant peu de place à celles dont la rhétorique inclut la narration, les émotions, les passions et les croyances. Cette situation ne doit pas rester inchangée. Les professionnel·les de la conservation-restauration et des métiers attenants peuvent remodeler leurs pratiques de multiples façons, permettant ainsi d'élargir la définition de la conservation-restauration et l'accès à cette communauté.

En utilisant le mouvement de justice pour les personnes handicapées et le design universel comme cadres de référence, cet article présente comment l'ouverture du domaine de la conservation-restauration au handicap peut l'aider à dépasser son approche curative de soin des objets ; à encourager les interactions physiques, intellectuelles et émotionnelles avec ces derniers par l'usage des plusieurs sens ; ainsi qu'à faire valoir la nécessité de prendre soin des aspects intangibles du patrimoine culturel.

IT IS TIME FOR CHANGE

The field of art and historic artifact conservation, in the US and Canada, is foundationally ableist. The practice of conservation relies heavily on both fine motor skills to treat fragile items, and smooth, gross motor skills to move these items. It holds paramount the superiority of academic writing that achieves linear coherence. It leaves little room, or respect, for those whose rhetoric includes storytelling, emotions, passion, and beliefs that are not backed up with “objective” facts.¹ Entry into the field requires the completion of a two-to-four-year master's degree and entry into graduate school typically requires multiple years of pre-graduate school internships that are poorly paid and almost always provide no health care benefits. Once employed in the field, conservation professionals are expected to work hours well beyond those that leave time for mental and physical health care and well-being.

Demographic analyses of the largest North American professional organization for art and historic artifact conservation professionals (the American Institute for Conservation – AIC) revealed that its membership is currently: 85% white, 77% female, 71% able-bodied, and 75% university-educated.² This rather homogenous group of people, trained in a rather homogenous way, is employed by the museums, libraries, historic societies and private collectors who hold in their care only a portion of the cultural heritage in the US and Canada. This group has developed and implements a very specialized practice, with an extensive knowledge base and defined ethical approaches to the care of art and historic artifacts. This exclusivity brings value to the objects that conservators care for and the work they do. Some argue this is just as it should be.³ Others have noted that significant change to the conservation field is needed.⁴

We, the authors, acknowledge that we have some ownership in the process that has maintained the perspective that exclusivity is what all conservators want.⁵ Today, we are part of the group advocating for change. As we do, we use the term, “crip” with intention.⁶ With it, we are reclaiming our life experiences intertwined with disabilities. By “cripping conservation,” we are bringing in these learned, lived experiences to show that all bodyminds, not just those with conservation graduate degrees, are playing a role in the conservation of cultural heritage.⁷ Sometimes this involves prolonging the life of the physical objects. Sometimes it is about extracting the stories that keep the objects alive, even as they themselves may fade away. Sometimes it is about keeping the objects in use so they can change the people who are using them. Sometimes it involves objects in museums but, often, it centres on objects, actions, and ideas far outside the museum boundaries.

In this article, we invite the reader to engage in the ongoing development of three concepts. Each one explores an approach to crippling

conservation that relies on aligning conservation with the principles of Disability Justice and Universal Design. They are not the only paths to crippling conservation, but they are, all together, a place to start.

1. **Adopting expansive definitions of conservation:** An expansive rather than exclusive definition of conservation is currently in use.⁸ When fully embraced, conservation is already more universally designed.
2. **Language and Disability as cultural heritage:** When the expanded definition is embraced, the boundaries of cultural heritage will move beyond physical objects to include the preservation of intangibles, including language and Disability culture, in the context of “crip futurity.”
3. **Multisensory access to cultural heritage:** When conservators embrace the fact that objects are not fully discovered through sight alone and collaborate with other museum professionals who do the same, they can provide multisensory access to cultural heritage in museums, aligned with Disability Justice.

THE LENSES OF DISABILITY JUSTICE AND UNIVERSAL DESIGN

Redefining, broadening, and crippling conservation encompasses and builds upon two well established disability frameworks: Disability Justice and Universal Design. These two frameworks advocate synergistically for changes with an intersectional goal: we cannot create an anti-ableist world if we do not also create an anti-racist, anti-classist, anti-sexist one. Crippling conservation means making it a non-discriminatory field that welcomes the crip of every race, every sex, every gender, every class, every *everything*. The crip in every body must see a way that everyone can take part in the process of caring for cultural heritage.

Disability Justice has, at its core, *an expectation of difference*.

Disability Justice holds that it is not possible to “comprehend ableism without

1 By “objective,” the authors are referring to the Eurocentric scientific practice that attempts to uncover truths by eliminating traditional beliefs, personal biases, and emotions. See Margaret Price, *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2011).

2 See American Institute for Conservation, “2019 AIC Membership Satisfaction: Survey Results,” 2019, <https://www.culturalheritage.org/publications/online-publications/survey-reports>; AIC Equity and Inclusion Committee, “2021 AIC Accessibility Survey: Survey Results,” October 24, 2022, <https://www.culturalheritage.org/docs/default-source/publications/reports/survey-reports/accessibility-in-conservation-report.pdf>; and AIC Membership Designation Working Group, “2018 AIC Member Designation Survey: Preliminary Report,” May 15, 2018, https://www.culturalheritage.org/docs/default-source/publications/reports/member-designation-survey---preliminary-reportb3996646946d640d929bfff0002fd16b.pdf?sfvrsn=c6f40a20_6.

3 In October 2021, the American Institute for Conservation (AIC) membership was involved in a contentious dialogue about categories of membership in the organization. The project to reevaluate membership categories was a multiyear project and the source of many comments that support the division noted here. Access to the dialogue is only available to members of AIC as the conversation is posted on a members-only forum.

4 See Jane Henderson, “Beyond Lifetimes: Who Do We Exclude When We Keep Things for the Future?,” *Journal of the Institute of Conservation* 43, no. 3 (September 1, 2020): 195–212, DOI: 10.1080/19455224.2020.1810729; Joelle Wickens et al., “Blog Series,” *What is Conservation?* (blog), January 17–April 11, 2022, <https://whatisconservation.com/blog-series/>; and Natalie Lawler and Ambre Tissot, “Preserving the Intangible and Immeasurable: Exploring Wellbeing Frameworks in the Museum Context,” *Journal of the Institute of Conservation* 44, no. 3 (September 21, 2021): 248–258, DOI: 10.1080/19455224.2021.1969973.

5 In this article the use of first person refers just to the authors. There are many references to the field of conservation and to society in general that also include the authors. Referring to these groups in third person languages seems to exclude the authors from these groups. That is not the intent. We see ourselves as responsible members of all of these groups, playing a role in the positive and negative expressed about each of these groups in this story.

6 The term “crip” was used historically to stigmatize and oppress disabled people but it has been reclaimed by some people who identify as having disabilities. According to the University of Minnesota Critical Disability Studies Collective, “crip theory” is “an academic (sub)field that was first made popular by scholars like Robert McRuer and Carrie Sandahl. Crip theory is a blurring or merging of queer theory and critical disability studies. Crip theory explores how the social pressures and norms around ability intersect with the social pressures and norms around gender/sexuality.” University of Minnesota, “Terminology,” *Critical Disability Studies Collective*, <https://cdsc.umn.edu/cds/terms#:~:text=%E2%80%9CCrip%20theory%E2%80%9D%20as%20an%20academic,theory%20and%20critical%20disability%20studies>.

7 “Bodymind” is a disability studies concept that, as defined by Margaret Price, emphasizes how “mental and physical processes not only affect each other but also give rise to each other... because they tend to act as one, even though they are conventionally understood as two,” thus impacting our experiences and outlook as the disabled people in our ableist society. Margaret Price, “The Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain,” *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 30, no. 1 (2015): 268–84.

8 The use of expansive rather than inclusive as the counterpoint to exclusive is intentional. For the authors, inclusive still implies a boundary within which people are included. Expansive implies the pushing out and expanding beyond boundaries.

grasping its interrelations with heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, colonialism and capitalism, each system co-creating an ideal bodymind built upon exclusion and elimination of a subjugated other from whom profits and status are extracted.”⁹ No *body* is the same. There is no one typical or ideal body and anything that deviates from that body is less than. Bodies come in different sizes, colors, and shapes. The people in these bodies have different physical, intellectual, spiritual and emotional abilities. All of these variations are expected, and no one variation is better than another. The intertwining of White supremacy culture and ableism has established marginalized groups of people who are deemed to be less worthy, able, smart, and capable. Disability Justice works to abolish the perception of “less than.” Disability Justice demands that all bodies be valued, respected, and seen as contributing to the multifaceted world in which we live.¹⁰

Universal Design accepts that *no one size fits all*. It considers “the diverse needs and abilities of all throughout the design process” and, when implemented, spaces and environments are designed and composed to be accessed, understood, and used to the greatest extent possible by all people, “regardless of their age, ability or disability.”¹¹ There is no need for reactive adaptation, modification, or specialized solutions because “diverse needs and abilities”¹² of all bodies have been considered in the creation process.¹³ “The essence of Universal Design lies in its ability to ... mediate extremes without destroying differences in places, experiences, and things.”¹⁴

When the two lenses of Disability Justice and Universal Design are brought together and fully realized, the end result brings us closer to a world where difference is the norm, and the spaces and institutions these different people inhabit provide structures that support dignified lives lived in many different ways. Many will say this world will never exist, but “The place in which [we] will fit will not exist until [we] make it.”¹⁵ So, let’s start small, and imagine how it could begin to exist in the field of conservation.

ADOPTING EXPANSIVE DEFINITIONS OF CONSERVATION

In order to crip the conservation of cultural heritage through Disability Justice and Universal Design, we begin by reflecting on what cultural heritage is. Cultural heritage is as beautiful, diverse, and complicated as all of the people and cultures that create it. Given a single, physical piece of cultural heritage, there are usually (and perhaps always) multiple ways to understand it, multiple stories connected to it, and multiple facets to preserve. This diversity of cultural heritage is out there today, well beyond the walls of the museums of Canada and the US. The homogenous group described above, however, is the group formally recognized by the museum world as conserving this heritage. It is this group and the opportunity they have before them to “crip conservation” that we call on to adopt the following mindset. A mindset proposed but not currently embodied by their membership organizations.

In answer to the question “What is Conservation?,” the AIC website states: “Conservation encompasses all those actions taken toward the long-term preservation of cultural heritage.”¹⁶ The Canadian Association for

9 Sins Invalid, *Skin, Tooth, and Bone: The Basis of Movement is Our People. A Disability Justice Primer*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Dancer’s Group, 2019), 111, <http://www.sinsinvalid.org/disability-justice-primer>.

10 Ibid.

11 National Disability Authority, “What is Universal Design? Definition and Overview,” *Centre for Excellence in Design*, <https://universaldesign.ie/what-is-universal-design/>.

12 Ibid.

13 The seven principles of Universal Design are as followed: (1) equitable use; (2) flexibility in use; (3) simple and intuitive use; (4) perceptible information; (5) tolerance for error; (6) low physical effort; and (7) size and space for approach and use.

14 Attributed to two designers, Bill Stumpf and Don Chadwick, in “Inclusive Design and Accessible Architecture: Why They Are Pivotal Today,” *RMJM*, May 4, 2021, <https://rmjm.com/inclusive-design-accessible-architecture/>.

15 James Baldwin, quoted in Claudia R. Pierpont, “Another Country: James Baldwin’s flight from America,” *The New Yorker*, February 9, 2009, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/02/09/another-country>. Baldwin was referring specifically to race in this quote. We take the liberty to use it more broadly.

16 AIC, “What is Conservation?,” <https://www.culturalheritage.org/about-conservation/what-is-conservation>.

Conservation of Cultural Property (CAC) responds to the same question in a very similar fashion: “Conservation is all actions aimed at the safeguarding of cultural heritage for the future.”¹⁷ Both professional organizations hold up *all actions* and *cultural heritage*. The first step to crippling conservation is as simple and as difficult as truly adopting and living out these definitions.

- **All actions:** If someone is doing something, anything, that can be linked back to long-term preservation of cultural heritage, they are doing conservation.
- **Cultural heritage:** Heritage includes the tangible and the intangible, the natural, the built, the digital, the physical, memories, traditions, practices, products, expression, things, ideas...¹⁸

If conservation includes *all actions* to preserve a *cultural heritage* that is much more than physical, we have an opportunity to recognize and understand the conservation of cultural heritage as a collective care practice. Disability Justice calls out the care of humans as a practice in which we all take part. It is not just the medical professionals and able-bodied caretakers who provide care for bodies. We can all provide care for each other physically, mentally and emotionally as families, friends, colleagues and communities. Doing so, combined with recognizing what we are doing, makes this care an anti-ableist practice, a practice open to all bodies.¹⁹ “It takes a *village* really, and great advocacy and allyship and demonstration, patience, time, education [and] the willingness to be open...to experiencing what it entails.”^{20, 21} Living out and practicing the above mentioned definitions of conservation emphasizes that conservation is a “restorative” process and an anti-ableist collective care practice in which all of us have a role.

Once conservation is recognized as the collective care of all cultural heritage, we see that when educators and interpreters provide programs where skills are developed and memories are created around cultural heritage objects and ideas, these skills and memories become a form of conservation. They preserve those objects, their impacts, and their meanings in the abilities and minds of people who will carry them forward. A teenager taking Irish dance classes is doing conservation because they are taking action to learn and preserve a cultural practice. When Hindu practitioners teach others to pour milk, ghee and rosewater over religious idols to feed them, they are doing the same. The environmental scientists who are developing ways to assist communities on the brink of disaster due to sea level rise, permafrost melt, and other impacts of climate change are doing heritage conservation, not just conservation of the natural environment. The plants, animals, and insects that are the materials and food ingredients of diverse cultural communities are heritage, and they cannot be preserved without the actions of these scientists.²²

The adoption of these already-expressed definitions of conservation also makes it obvious that archivists, historic preservation architects and engineers, art handlers, and collection care technicians are doing

17 CAC, “What is Conservation?,” <https://www.cac-accr.ca/conservation/>.

18 There is no one definitive definition of cultural heritage. When examined collectively the available definitions point to a very expansive definition of cultural heritage.

19 Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018), 45.

20 Sheena Goodyear, “Nurse Performs Halifax Hospital’s 1st Smudging Ceremony – for Her Sister’s Baby,” *CBC Radio*, July 14, 2023, <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/asithappens/halifax-hospital-smudging-ceremony-1.6907186>.

21 In this paper, “allyship” is used in place of “shared stewardship,” as the term “stewardship” itself has historical and sociopolitical implications of power imbalance and cultivates exclusivity. The

authors view “allyship” as an expansive, collaborative alternative to shared stewardship when bringing together multiple, diverse perspectives on a more equitable footing.

22 Susie Silook, “Protecting Our Precious Subsistence Resource Walrus Ivory,” *Cultural Survival*, November 28, 2016, <https://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/protecting-our-precious-subsistence-resource-walrus-ivory>; Daisy Dunne, “Interactive: How Climate Change Could Threaten the World’s Traditional Dishes,” *CarbonBrief: Clear on Climate*, n.d., https://interactive.carbonbrief.org/how-climate-change-could-threaten-worlds-traditional-dishes/?utm_source=Redirect&utm_campaign=traditionaldishes0819#:~:text=They%20found%20that%20cabbages%20grown,cabbage%2C%E2%80%9D%20the%20authors%20say.

conservation. So are cemetery groundskeepers, stonemasons, museum HVAC engineers, facility managers, and pest management specialists whose work all contributes to the physical preservation of historic objects. The oral historians, registrars, curators, and educators who all work to preserve the stories that connect to the objects and facilitate experiences that explore those stories are taking part in the conservation process. Objects are nothing without the stories that tell their history.

To enter *this* expanded field of conservation, there are paths beyond conservation graduate schools that are already creating conservators. These other paths are much more available to those in all locations on the ability spectrum. The paths that train stonemasons, cemetery groundskeepers, conservation technicians, and filmmakers are creating conservators. In the daily work of each of these professions, there are *actions* that are taken toward the *long-term preservation of cultural heritage*.

There are also paths that can be reintroduced. Training as an apprentice with a practising conservator is a path that used to exist. It could be brought back in an updated form. This could be the most welcoming path for someone whose mental and physical abilities do not seem to align with the requirements of conservation graduate programs. A multi-year experience with a committed mentor would allow time for the apprentice to experiment with various tasks through adaptive equipment and processes. By the time the apprentice is ready to move on, they would have a clear understanding of the conservation work they can do and the accommodations they require to be successful. This path might also be the right one for someone who has incredible hand skills and whose ways of communicating and expressing are not currently conducive to success in a university environment where the accommodation process is often complicated and limited.²³ Apprentice training could work for someone for whom a graduate degree is a financial impossibility. It might be a welcome option for those whose emotional support systems are intimately tied to a community and for whom leaving this community for two to four years of graduate school training would be damaging to the individual and the community.

There are new paths that could be created, including conservation certificates and continuing education programs for HVAC engineers, electricians, plumbers, carpenters, and many other “trades.” We cannot keep our historic structures, museums, libraries, archives, and historical societies in good order without them. These certificate programs would add a layer to their current training that would provide knowledge of materials and approaches that will give them tools to use to extend the life of the cultural heritage on which and around which they work. For instance, they will learn about the interactions their building materials can have with cultural heritage objects. They will know where to find information about conservation-grade materials and be encouraged to contribute to open resource databases such as Conservation & Art Materials Encyclopedia Online (CAMEO) and information sharing projects like AIC’s Materials Working Group.²⁴

There are new jobs that could be created. Rather than understanding conservation as an exclusive work reserved for a few university-educated professionals who are trained to physically stabilize and repair objects, these university-educated professionals can establish centres and programs where they can share knowledge with others about what they have learned about materials and their care. Through these hands-on learning programs, these conservators will also have opportunities to collaborate actively

23 Jay Timothy Dolmage, *Academic Ableism: Disability and Higher Education* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 22, 79.

24 Conservation & Art Materials Encyclopedia Online, https://cameo.mfa.org/wiki/Main_Page; AIC, Materials Working Group, https://www.conservation-wiki.com/wiki/Materials_Working_Group.

with source communities. Done right, these programs then become an allyship where caretakers are teaching each other rather than a hierarchical transfer of knowledge from those with graduate-degree-certified knowledge to those without.

Admittedly, this *crip* field of conservation is amorphous, with perhaps hundreds of paths to entry and implementation. The lack of a single path and a clear set of skills that must be perfected to become a conservator will be disconcerting for many. Some will fear that their professional designations will lose their value and affect their standings in the museum community. We hope the opportunity to create an environment that welcomes – right alongside the white, female, able-bodied, university-educated people who are already welcome – people who identify not only as physically disabled and neurologically diverse but also as low-income, BIPoC, and 2S/LGBTQ+ offers a strong counterbalance to losing a clear, singular path. Definitions of conservation provided by AIC and CAC may already be expansive, but we need to acknowledge that these two organizations initially developed out of the colonial system, so in order to decolonize, we need to look inwards and outwards to truly practice the collective care of all cultural heritage by everyone. This is our first step to *cripping* conservation.

LANGUAGE AND DISABILITY AS CULTURAL HERITAGE

The broader definitions of conservation *crip* conservation, as just described, by redefining who is doing conservation, and they *crip* conservation by expanding what we conserve. Adopting an understanding of cultural heritage that includes much more than the physical allows conservation to move beyond the well-established Eurocentric concept of conservation as something that only addresses physical objects and issues of their materiality.²⁵ Conservation departments in museums of the US and Canada clean, repair, and stabilize physical objects. They aim to preserve materials used in the objects through tight climate control. They survey objects to dictate which ones are physically stable enough to travel for exhibits or loans. All of these actions are based on the singular principle of Eurocentric science and materials classification.²⁶ If cultural heritage is much more than physical objects, then conservation will need to decentre the physical.

One possible reframing is to centre people and what holds meaning for them in the conservation process rather than the physical objects collected by museums. An example of this would be the preservation of Deaf cultures and languages becoming acts of conservation, and this would be “*crip* futurity.”²⁷ *Crip* futurity explores how, by “re-storying embodied differences” in our bodyminds, we can work toward a world where disability is welcome, and the collective knowledge and practices of disabled people contribute to its development from the past, in the present and into the future(s).²⁸ In this world, the disabled bodymind is not broken and in need of repair. It is a rich contributor to our understanding and experience and what comes from it is something that needs to be conserved.²⁹ Preservation of Deaf cultures and languages holds these entities out as something we will want in the future(s), something that is worth the time, energy, and financial investment it will take to keep them around. This act

25 Foekje Boersma, Kathleen Dardes, and James Druzik, “Precaution, Proof, and Pragmatism: Evolving Perspectives on the Museum,” *The Getty Conservation Institute: Conservation Perspectives* (Fall 2014), https://www.getty.edu/conservation/publications_resources/newsletters/29_2/evolving_perspectives.html.

26 Joyce Hill Stoner, “Changing Approaches in Art Conservation: 1925 to the Present,” in *Scientific Examination of Art: Modern Techniques in Conservation and Analysis*, ed. National Academy of Sciences (Washington, DC: The National Academies

Press, 2005), <https://nap.nationalacademies.org/read/11413/chapter/5#42>.

27 The term Deaf is used with an uppercase “D” to emphasize that they are meta-linguistically and culturally Deaf.

28 Carla Rice, Eliza Chandler, Jen Rinaldi, Nadine Changfoot, Kirsty Liddiard, Roxane Mykitiuk and Ingrid Mundel, “Imagining Disability Futurities,” *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 32, no. 2 (2017): 213–29, DOI: 10.1111/hypa.12321.

29 Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).

of conservation affirms the concept of “crip futurity,” that disability is understood as political, valuable, and integral, encouraging us to decentre the physical and to centre people.

In the past, “Deaf-dumb” was used by hearing people to describe Deaf people who used sign language and did not “speak.”³⁰ Over the past century, the governments of hearing bodies tried to “fix” Deaf people and assimilate them into the audio-centric mainstream by “educating” them to speak through various forms of oppression.³¹ There were hearing scholars who argued that oral speech was an instrument of thought and knowledge, thus Deaf people were cognitively impaired and uncultured.³² They pushed for the singular “future” of audism, failing to recognize that Deaf people were already crip futurists with their own language and, consequently, culture.³³ They developed their intangible Deaf cultures out of their tangible Deaf selves, and their crip “future(s)” continue to our present and will continue to open pathways for multiple futures. There is a branch of linguistics that studies the relationship between language and culture, and it is called, “metalinguistics.”³⁴ It also observes how languages convey cultural knowledge and thus are an invaluable tool for cultural sustainability across generations: “The language represents the way of thinking of a people.”³⁵ Using voice is not the only way to communicate and connect with one another.

Language is a powerful, intrinsic marker of cultural identity that is intangible and not often preserved by conservators. People who identify as Deaf have been innovative and creative in doing so. They are crippling conservation by preserving their unique language, literature, history, and culture as crip futurists through social media, films, courses, and workshops. Deaf people do not see their disabilities as something that requires charity or medical treatments. They are comfortable with their disability or do not see themselves as having a disability, and know that, by effectively engaging and educating the public, they can support the preservation of rich, diverse Deaf cultures and histories.³⁶ Their crip future(s) did not and do not contain one Deaf culture but multiple ones.

American Sign Language (ASL) is a distinct language from English, and not all Deaf communities in the United States and Canada use ASL, which is true of some Black and Indigenous communities. The metalinguistic nature of diverse sign languages reflects the diversity in relationships between languages and cultural behaviors. Black Deaf history and culture developed differently than that of the largely white signers of ASL, in part because the communities were educated separately pre-desegregation. During this time, Black ASL (BASL) was developed using different signs from ASL, and it is still used today by approximately 50% of Black Deaf people in the US.³⁷ The unique grammar and vocabularies of BASL have gone largely undocumented until recently, with the release of

30 Wheeliequeer, “Let’s End Deaf & Dumb,” *Wheeliequeer*, April 19, 2020, <https://www.wheeliequeer.net/post/let-s-end-deaf-dumb>; Virginia Commonwealth University, “Deafness,” VCU Libraries: Social Welfare History Project, <https://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/issues/deaf-dumb/#:~:text=At%20that%20time%2C%20%E2%80%9Cdumb%E2%80%9D,as%20cognitively%20impaired%20as%20well>

31 Jonathan Ore, “Alexander Graham Bell’s Oralist Mission Still Harms Deaf and Hard of Hearing People, Say Critics,” *CBC Radio*, May 16, 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/unsound-the-legacy-of-alexander-graham-bell-1.6020596/alexander-graham-bell-s-oralist-mission-still-harms-deaf-and-hard-of-hearing-people-say-critics-1.6025659>.

32 Harvey P. Peet, “Memoir on the Origin and Early History of the Art of Instructing the Deaf and Dumb,” *American Annals of the Deaf and Dumb* 3, no. 3 (April 1851): 129–60.

33 The term “audism” was coined by Tom Humphries in his unpublished essay. His original definition was: “the notion that one is superior based on one’s ability to hear or behave in the manner

of one who hears.” See H-Dirksen L. Bauman, “Audism: Exploring the Metaphysics of Oppression,” *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education* 9, no. 2 (April 2004): 239–46, DOI: 10.1093/deafed/enh025.

34 E. Bialystok, “Children’s Concept of Word,” *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research* 15 (1986): 13–22.

35 Spoken by Francisco Cali Tzay, Chair of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination at the International Expert Group Meeting on Indigenous Languages. See “Protecting Languages, Preserving Cultures,” *United Nations*, <https://www.un.org/en/desa/protecting-languages-preserving-cultures-0>.

36 Georgina Kleege’s *More than Meets the Eye: What Blindness Brings to Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018) makes similar comments about the Blind community in Chapter 3, “Visible Braille, Invisible Blindness.”

37 Allyson Waller, “Black, Deaf and Extremely Online,” *The New York Times*, January 23, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/23/us/black-american-sign-language-tiktok.htm>.

a documentary, *Signing Black in America*.³⁸ Charmay, a BASL signer, created a series of TikTok clips to demonstrate how five generations of her Black Deaf family have communicated in BASL and to document the BASL history.³⁹ When she came across a comment on her TikTok account asking if the Black Deaf community can “preserve” BASL, her answer in sign language was re-*sound*-ingly: “We can!”⁴⁰

Plains Indian Sign language (PISL) developed long before Europeans invaded the North American continent. It was used to communicate between hearing and Deaf Indigenous peoples from different Plains Nations with different spoken languages. It was documented in a 1930 film that became infamous because Mayor General Hugh L. Scott stated that, “Young men are not learning your sign language, and soon it will disappear from this country. It is for us to make a record of it for those who come after us before it becomes lost forever.”⁴¹ Current PISL Hand Talkers, however few, have proved Scott wrong. Their language is not lost, and it continues to be embedded in their Indigenous heritage of the Plains. PISL courses and workshops are being developed to help Indigenous peoples in Plains Nations preserve their spoken and signed languages.⁴² Dr. Real Bird from the Crow Agency, Montana, hopes that by introducing PISL through multimedia teaching materials, Indigenous educators can balance their teaching methods with traditional practices to preserve their knowledge of language, culture, and history.⁴³

Some conservators may argue that language can and should be preserved as tangible records. Deaf communities as crip futurists have demonstrated otherwise. They are conserving their literature, stories, and culture beyond the framework of written, tangible documents in archives and museums, through creation of TikTok clips, courses, and workshops. Even though written records can be preserved in the form of books, tablets, or carvings, if there are no continued speakers, the associated history and culture will become forgotten. Between 1950 and 2010, 230 languages became “extinct” as a result of the forceful cultural assimilation, and thus language shifted under colonization by European countries.⁴⁴ The *1880 International Congress on Education of the Deaf* banned use of sign languages in Deaf schools in the UK, US, and Canada; the ban was formally lifted in 2010.⁴⁵ There is a belief that for languages to be preserved, they *must* be written.⁴⁶ Crip conservation disagrees: whether written, spoken or signaled, words are an art form that is strongly attached to humans. Only by continuing to use the language can the values and traditions be passed down for generations, thus preserving the cultural identities in communities. Objects have stories to tell but need humans to tell stories in their languages. Awareness of metalinguistics will encourage people to transfer usable cultural knowledge unique to their communities to their *future* crip futurists and beyond. There is no singular “the future” and there is no singular “story” that we have to strictly adhere to as conservators.

38 “Signing Black in America,” *Talking Black in America*, n.d., <https://www.talkingblackinamerica.org/signing-black-in-america/>.

39 Charmay is the social media handle of Nakia Smith.

40 Still Watching Netflix, “How To Sign in BASL (Black American Sign Language) | Strong Black Lead,” Youtube, November 30, 2020, 1:46–1:53, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3HDm3kx3rhY>.

41 The film was originally preserved in the National Archives and later digitized by Jeffrey E. David, who later published his research in *Hand Talk: Sign Language among American Indian Nations* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2010); Grande Polpo Deaf, “Indian Sign Language Council of 1930,” Youtube, June 19, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bTf2a5SGDFA&t=111s>.

42 Lanny Real Bird, “Reflections on Revitalizing and Reinforcing Native Languages and Cultures,” *Cogent Education* 4, no. 1 (November 2017): n.p., <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186x.2017.1371821>.

43 James Woodcock, “Dr. Lanny Real Bird Shows Lists of Signs,” *Billings Gazette*, July 8, 2012, <https://billingsgazette.com/news/>

state-and-regional/montana/dr-lanny-real-bird-shows-lists-of-signs/image_8d9f4869-af55-5866-b5da-5df9fe0f5dc7.html.

44 “Understanding Extinct Languages: When and Why they Die Off,” International Languages Services, INC®, November 12, 2019, <https://www.ilstranslations.com/blog/understanding-extinct-languages-when-and-why-they-die-off/>.

45 See Jamie Berke, “The Milan Conference of 1880: When Sign Language Was Almost Destroyed,” *VeryWellHealth*, June 16, 2023, <https://www.verywellhealth.com/deaf-history-milan-1880-1046547/>; and Ava Scribe, “Deaf Awareness Week: The History & Cultural Significance of Sign Language,” &AVA, May 3, 2023, <https://blog.ava.me/deaf-awareness-week-the-history-cultural-significance-of-sign-language#:~:text=The%20report%20also%20addressed%20the,the%20ban%20was%20formally%20lifted.>

46 J. Alden Mason, “Linguistic Research in the University Museum,” *PennMuseum Bulletin* 19, no. 2 (June 1955): 3–13.

MULTISENSORY ACCESS TO CULTURAL HERITAGE

Here, we shift our focus away from crippling our definitions and concepts of what conservation is toward crippling how conservation is practised. Today, in museums and many institutions, sight is the primary way of experiencing and getting to know objects. The visitor is hardly ever invited to touch, smell, taste, or listen to an object. This was not always the case. Restrictions on using senses other than sight in museum spaces emerged gradually. In the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, some records show that museum visitors were welcome to touch, pick up, shake, smell, and taste objects in collections.⁴⁷ These practices were allowed and encouraged as it was understood that interacting with an object only through sight limited understanding to surface appearances. Taking time to use other senses to interact with an object provided a path to understanding truths not accessible through sight and corrected deceptions that grow from sight-only examinations.⁴⁸ However, as the goal of museums shifted in the direction of long-term physical preservation of objects for future generations, the privilege of touching objects became an action reserved for only conservators and connoisseurs. Simultaneously, as museums became public, objects on display were placed behind glass, *out of touch*, to “protect” objects and civilize society at the same time.⁴⁹ Some have gone as far as saying that the development of modern conservation had a primary role in the shift away from using anything but sight to understand museum objects.⁵⁰ Whether this is the case or not, conservators have an awesome opportunity to help shift our museum experiences to multisensory ones, moving us simultaneously back and forward in time. In doing so, they will help cripple conservation and the museum-going experience.

We often conflate seeing with knowing. We use the phrase, “I was blind but now I see” to mean that at some point in time I did not understand but now I do. Here we ask the reader to pause. Think about how many times just today you used the senses, other than sight, available to you to understand the world around you. It will become obvious that if we only saw, we would not fully comprehend our surroundings. When you lift a mug to drink coffee, not only will you smell and taste coffee but also add the texture and weight of the mug to your understanding. When you put on a piece of clothing, you add its scent, texture, weight and movement to your knowledge. We see and listen to birds. We see, smell, taste, and even touch and hear the food we eat. These bodily ways of knowing are equally and often more powerful than cognitive ways.⁵¹ Interviews with people caught touching objects in the British Museum revealed that people were touching because they wanted to “feel how deep an engraving went,” “feel how smooth the monument is,” “understand and appreciate the artistry involved in making it.”⁵² These people knew their eyes were not revealing the full nature of the object, and they could not resist an unauthorized touch to understand more. Conservators and other museum professionals who have the privilege of interacting with museum objects using senses other than sight know that these visitors are right. A gentle shake lets them know if something is inside an object. A touch lets them know if it is as brittle or sticky as it looks. A sniff helps them identify deteriorating plastic or the previous use of mothballs. These professionals know their intimate access to objects deepens their understanding of those objects. Prioritizing similar access for others will turn these professionals into Disability Justice allies.⁵³

47 Cara Giaimo, “Why Can’t People Stop Touching Museum Exhibits?,” *Atlas Obscura*, November 10, 2017, <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/museum-touch-exhibit-objects-multisensory>.

48 Constance Classen and David Howes, “The Museum as Sensescape: Western Sensibilities and Indigenous Artifacts,” in *Sensible Objects: Colonialism, Museums and Material Culture*, ed. Elizabeth Edwards, Chris Gosden, and Ruth B. Phillips (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2006), 201–202.

49 Classen and Howes, “The Museum as Sensescape,” 208.

50 Elizabeth Edwards, Chris Gosden, and Ruth B. Phillips, “Introduction,” in *Sensible Objects*, 23.

51 Kathryn Linn Geurts and Elvis Gershon Adikah, “Enduring and Endearing Feelings and the Transformation of Material Culture in West Africa,” in *Sensible Objects*, 59.

52 Giaimo, “Why Can’t People Stop Touching Museum Exhibits?”

53 Sins Invalid, *Skin, Tooth and Bone*, 31.

Admitting that only seeing an object is not even enough for the “able-bodied” visitor, and thus collaborating with other museum professionals to provide multisensory access to museums can become “the curb cut and wheelchair ramp” of the human-object experience. Curb cuts and wheelchair ramps were introduced for people like me, Joelle Wickens: those who use wheelchairs to get around.⁵⁴ Now they are used by delivery people with carts, caretakers with strollers, bicyclists, and skateboarders, to name a few. This phenomenon of designing to address the needs of the disabled but benefiting everyone in the process is called, “the Curb-Cut Effect,” Universal Design in action.⁵⁵ The initial motivation for multisensory experiences in museums has been access for visitors who are blind, but such experiences can significantly improve the museum experience for all.⁵⁶

To do this, conservators and other museum practitioners will need to shift their priorities away from long-term physical preservation of objects for future use toward facilitating collective access to support current understanding and growth. Educators and interpreters have been working in this direction for at least a decade.⁵⁷ They recognize that there are many different learning styles which extend beyond the visual and auditory. The idea is not a totally new concept for the conservation profession. It remains, however, one that is far from being fully implemented.⁵⁸ We know that if museums existed simply to preserve things, they would put them in a cold, dark, fireproof, pest-proof, oxygen-free environment and leave them be.⁵⁹ We do not do this. We know that long-term preservation is not our only goal. Embracing and implementing the idea that multisensory access and human-object encounters are equally important and perhaps even more important than long-term physical preservation will take creativity, patience, and persistence.

A place for conservators to begin is to incorporate the use of all, or most, senses in their object descriptions and condition reporting. Recording how an object feels to the touch, whether it has a scent or makes a noise, but probably not how it tastes (for health and safety reasons alone) would be easy. If registrars, cataloguers, and curators also modified their work in this way, our documentation of museum objects would approach something that is more Universally Designed. With this information in online catalogs, those reading about objects can imagine and perhaps understand them on different levels. As we move forward with such an effort, it will be important to understand how people use different senses to understand the same event. As a deaf person, I, Sally Kim, would need to touch a shaking rattle in order to feel and react to the texture of the gentle, tickly vibrations of the rattle in motion. My hearing colleague could certainly do the same but would more likely first respond to the sound of the rattle in motion, perhaps describing it as “the pitter-patter of rain falling.” It will also be necessary to expand our vocabularies. *More than Meets the Eye* by Georgina Kleege suggests that inviting those who do not rely primarily on visual perception to collaborate on this work would help us develop richer vocabularies for our documentation.⁶⁰ Bembibre and Strlič have shown how heritage scientists can develop an “odour wheel of historic books containing general aroma categories.”⁶¹ If conservators use their privileged access to extract this multisensory information from objects,

54 Steven E. Brown, “The Curb Ramps of Kalamazoo: Discovering Our Unrecorded History,” *Independent Living Institute*, 1999, <https://www.independentliving.org/docs3/brown99a.html>.

55 Angela Glover Blackwell, “The Curb-Cut Effect,” *Stanford Social Innovation Review* 15, no. 1 (2017): 28–33, DOI: 10.48558/YVMS-CC96.

56 Kleege, *More Than Meets the Eye*; Kiersten F. Latham and Elizabeth Wood, *The Objects of Experience: Transforming Visitor-Object Encounters in Museums* (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2014).

57 Latham and Wood, *The Objects of Experience*.

58 Jane Henderson and Ashley Lingle, “Touch Decisions: For

Heritage Objects,” *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation* 63, no. 1 (2023): 1–13, DOI: 10.1080/01971360.2023.2175983.

59 Trevor Jones and Rainey Tisdale, “A Manifesto for Active History Museum Collections,” in *Active Collections*, ed. Elizabeth Wood, Rainey Tisdale, and Trevor Jones (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 8.

60 Kleege, *More Than Meets the Eye*, 68–69.

61 Cecilia Bembibre and Matija Strlič, “Smell of Heritage: A Framework for the Identification, Analysis and Archival of Historic Odours,” *Heritage Science* 5, no. 1 (2017): 1–11, DOI: 10.1186/s40494-016-0114-1.

they model an expectation that people will come to know objects via multiple paths. This modeling will make them active allies in the fight for Disability Justice.

For the conservator who is trained to record verifiable, “objective” facts, including in these descriptions an account of the emotions activated by an interaction with an object might be a slightly more challenging step. However, this could support educators and interpreters who work to provide visitors with meaningful encounters with objects and invite them to connect through their senses, their intellect, and their emotions.⁶² An example of such a project is The Rubin Museum’s *Dream-Over* program, which gives individuals the opportunity to spend a night in the museum, sleeping near an artwork selected just for them.⁶³ This program was designed to “integrate the embodied, feeling, social, spiritual, creative, playful, learning and vulnerable selves.” When writing about it, Tisdale asks us to “actively and intentionally consider objects’ potential to address not just learning but also other human needs: healing, self-reflection, social bridging, activism, idea generation.”⁶⁴ Museums, and the conservators who work for them, often try to present themselves as politically and emotionally neutral sites of learning and research, but they are cultural products from colonial enterprises. The collections in these museums have evolved from stockpiles of objects looted or coerced by Eurocentric imperialists from fetishized, tokenized, and marginalized cultures.⁶⁵ We need to acknowledge this uncomfortable truth and use the space as an opportunity to open the dialogue for a richer experience of processing emotions, feelings and thoughts produced in the museum spaces. Initiatives like the *Dream-Over* program, are a chance for museum professionals, researchers, and visitors to come to terms with their conflicting attitudes of power differentials and moral complexity/ambiguity when interacting with objects in museums. When conservators recognize that prioritizing the long-term physical survival of objects over being available for programs like this is not neutral and they commit to supporting these interactive programs, they again reinforce allyship with Disability Justice.

In order to support all of these ideas, conservators could work with educators, interpreters, curators, and registrars to identify the objects already in their accessioned collections that could be used for tactile, multi-sensory experiences with minimal impact on their long-term physical preservation.⁶⁶ This could be taken a step further by accessioning new objects, collected to be part of these tactile collections, with the expectation that touching these objects will shorten their physical lifetime. The most radical step in this process would be to approach all artifacts in a museum collection as things that should be used.

A multisensory approach for conservation to support the exploration of objects well beyond the visual is an act of Disability Justice. Like curb cuts and wheelchair ramps, these new approaches will help the disabled, for whom they were originally developed, but they can become Universally Designed tools that benefit everyone. Crippling conservation will bring in the much-needed Curb-Cut Effect.

CONCLUSION

By aligning Disability Justice and Universal Design with conservation, we can cripp conservation, turning it into a restorative process for all bodies. By truly

62 Latham and Wood, *The Objects of Experience*; Charles Weisenberger, “Please Touch the Objects: Tactile Models and Alternative Approaches to Curation,” *O Say Can You See? Stories from the Museum*, July 10, 2015, <https://americanhistory.si.edu/blog/please-touch-objects-tactile-models-and-alternative-approaches-curation>.

63 The Rubin, “Dream-Over: A Sleepover for Adults,” *The Rubin*, December 7, 2019, <https://rubinmuseum.org/events/event/dream-over-12-07-2019>; Wood, Tisdale, and Jones, *Active Collections*.

64 Wood, Tisdale, and Jones, *Active Collections*, 29.

65 Kelli Morgan, “How Can Museums Truly Shake Off Their Colonial Legacy?,” *Hyperallergic*, March 8, 2023, <https://hyperallergic.com/806866/how-can-museums-truly-shake-off-their-colonial-legacy/>.

66 In July 2023, conservators and educators at the Cleveland Museum of Art reported they were doing this on a limited basis.

adopting and living out the definition of “conservation” offered by AIC and CAC, we can expand our field to become a collective care practice. We can move conservation of cultural heritage beyond physical objects and issues of their materiality to bring in intangible aspects, such as the languages and stories being preserved by Deaf crip futurists. Crippling conservation can also bring back to museums the multisensory approach to learning about heritage. There are many practitioners and caretakers out there who are already crippling conservation in their own way. They are using forms of social media, public programs, and collaborative efforts to preserve their cultural heritage and make it more anti-ableist and accessible. They have found creative ways to reinterpret and address human-object experience/encounters inside and outside of museum spaces. Each one of these approaches to crippling conservation centres people, moving conservation from a “material-based” endeavor to a “people-centred” one.

What we conservators need to do is acknowledge that there have always been many, many ways of doing. We need to accept this and be open to learning these conservation practices. We, primarily graduate-school-trained conservators, cannot speak for all objects or peoples by whom the objects were intended to be used. If someone is doing something that can be linked back to long-term preservation of cultural heritage, they are doing conservation. In this understanding, conservation becomes something that can be *accessed, understood and used...by all people regardless of their age, size, gender, ability or disability.*

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DISCLAIMER

This paper gives the opinions of the authors that do not necessarily reflect positions of the institutions at which we are currently employed. Joelle does not speak for UD/WUDPAC and, similarly, Sally does not speak for the Royal British Columbia Museum.