



Neurodivergency and Interdependent Creation: Breaking into Canadian Disability Arts

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ABSTRACT *Disability arts has traditionally been understood as that which is led, created, and/or curated by disabled artists. While disability arts and culture in Canada has continued to grow and develop over the last number of decades, I have perceived a notable lack of neurodivergent artists being included at disability arts events and community gatherings. I question if this lack of representation may be due in part to this perception of disability arts as having to be led exclusively by those with lived experience of disability. In this paper, I will critically engage with concepts of inter-abled artistic collaboration, interdependency and the need to re-imagine disability arts leadership structures to better include neurodivergent artists and their allies. I will further position my ideas around this topic within the context of the roundtable discussion on the future of disability arts leadership that took place at the Crippling the Arts Symposium in 2019.*

KEYWORDS neurodivergency; disability arts; interdependence; inter-abled collaboration; leadership

Introduction

Disability art has traditionally been understood as that which is led, created, or curated by disabled artists. Recognizing that the disability arts movement in Canada emerged from the disability rights activism of the 1970s and 1980s (Gorman, 2007, p. 46), it is unsurprising that much of the art being created by disabled artists is rooted in social justice organizing and commentary. While disability arts and culture in Canada has continued to grow and develop over the last number of decades, there is still a noticeable lack of neurodivergent artists present on our stages or represented at disability arts community gatherings or symposia.

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As a non-disabled artist and researcher who for the past seven years has worked primarily with neurodivergent teens and adults through collaborative arts practices, I am interested in confronting this absence. Why are neurodivergent people so scarcely represented within the Canadian disability arts community? What are the reasons for this fissure in inclusion and representation? What practice-based resources and understandings are lost for the wider disability arts community from this lack of inclusion? In this paper, I query the reason for this scarcity of representation by investigating the fact that neurodivergent artists often work in collaboration with or under the direction of non-disabled artist allies. This dynamic has received both criticism and praise and is ultimately in need of further scholarly engagement. (Hadley, 2020; Hargrave, 2015; Perring, 2005).

Drawing from current community discourse around neurodiversity, I use the term “neurodivergent” to describe minds that function in ways that diverge from dominant societal standards of “normal.” In contrast, “neurotypical” describes minds that function in predictable ways and meet conventional societal standards (Walker, 2014). Using this definition, neurodivergence describes a number of diverse disability experiences that include autism, Down syndrome, brain injury, dyslexia, etc. I do not use “neurodivergent” to refer specifically to members of the Neurodiversity Movement, which stems from the Autism Rights Movement. Rather, I use the word as an umbrella term for the diverse community of artists whom I have the most experience working with as a non-disabled artist collaborator. This group of neurodivergent artists may otherwise be labelled as having intellectual or developmental disabilities, learning or cognitive disabilities, and require or seek certain levels of creative support that others who might share their diagnosis (e.g., autism) may not necessarily require. I offer a final note about terminology to acknowledge that while it is always preferable to describe individuals using the terms that they use to self-identify, the various self-labels used by the artists I work with are extensive and varied and thus I choose to use neurodivergent for this purpose.

In an attempt to unpack the lack of representation of neurodivergent artists in disability arts circles I will examine the ways in which this exclusion may in some ways extend from the complex histories of inter-abled artistic relationships.¹ To do this, I look specifically at the concepts of “art brut” and “outsider art.” I explore these concepts to draw attention to the ways in which they have historically diminished the autonomy and undercut the personal creativity of disabled artists, and further, how this has shaped the desire for contemporary disability arts to be exclusively disability-led. While overlap between outsider art and disability art exists in terms of bringing the work of marginalized artists to the fore, in this paper I will demonstrate how disability

¹ I use the term “inter-abled” to refer to relationships between those who have lived experience of disability and those who do not. The term inter-abled is commonly used to describe romantic relationships between a disabled and non-disabled individual though that is not my purpose here.

art distinguishes itself by centring disabled artistic vision and practice. As an artistic and sociocultural movement, I suggest that disability arts has the potential to facilitate the inclusion of disabled artists in Canada's arts and culture sector and offer unique and innovative aesthetics and processes of artistic creation. By exploring the roles of and relationship between neurodivergent artists and their non-disabled collaborators, I will highlight how their artistic work and collaborations complicate and disrupt existing understandings of disability arts practices and protocols, while offering new ways of working and creating that embrace alternative ways of knowing and being in the world.

To explore these collaborative practices and processes I will present three examples of Canadian inter-abled and interdependent artistic collaborations,² noting their unique contributions to the field of disability arts and the ways in which they navigate dynamics of power and artistic leadership within their practice. I then work with these examples to show how support-based structures of artistic creation are approached and implemented outside of the Canadian context, demonstrating how these practices inform accessible, interdependent methodologies, and have the potential to inform the Canadian disability arts canon and community. I will conclude this paper by offering a detailed account of my experience leading a roundtable discussion on the future of disability arts leadership at the *Crippling the Arts Symposium* in 2019.³ *Crippling the Arts* brought together disabled artists, allies, and key stakeholders in disability arts practice and scholarship to create a supportive and encouraging space to engage in critical conversations about the state of disability arts nationally and internationally. It was the conversations that took place during this leadership roundtable that prompted my desire to explore in more depth the complexities of inter-abled collaboration and leadership within Canadian disability arts.⁴

By thinking critically about the interdependent approaches to artistic creation that happen in inter-abled collaboration, I reimagine an approach to disability arts that takes into account the generative, supportive partnerships between neurodivergent artists and the neurotypical allies who often facilitate access to and participation in artistic creation and production processes

² Interdependence is a term positioned as a critical alternative to the oft-valued independence. Interdependence is a shared or reciprocal dependency between people. As noted by Mia Mingus (2010), "Interdependency is both 'you and I' and 'we'. It is solidarity, in the best sense of the word" (n.p.).

³ *Crippling the Arts* was a three-day symposium that took place in 2019 at Toronto's Harbourfront Centre. The symposium events included panel discussions, co-creative workshops, exhibitions and performances. The programming of these events intended to animate "how Deaf, Mad, and Disability Arts and activism changes how we experience art and culture as well as the ways [this] sector contributes, and leads to, the achievements of disability rights and justice movements" (Harbourfront Centre, 2019)

⁴ The *Crippling the Arts* Leadership roundtable panelists included Nicholas Herd, Sage Lovell, Sean Lee, Michael Nimbley and Catherine Bourgeois (Herd et al., 2019). See <https://youtu.be/xiwACbRjPw0> (Creative Users Project, 2019)

(Hadley, 2020). While historically the collaborative work of neurodivergent and neurotypical artists has been understood within the context of “art therapy,” I suggest that within the framework of disability arts culture that centres the disability experience and takes a cripistemological approach to artistic practice and production,⁵ that there is opportunity for these inter-abled collaborations to develop and thrive. Counter to the view that inter-abled collaborations diminish the value or authenticity of disability arts practice, I argue that such innovative and interdependent ways of working and creating may in fact lead to new artistic aesthetics and methodologies that can support greater inclusion of neurodivergent artists and serve the wider disability arts community. Opening the doors of disability arts and culture to more neurodivergent artists and the non-disabled artist allies who support their practice helps create a disability arts future that welcomes participation from artists across the spectrum of disability experience.

Outsider Art versus Disability Art

While an in-depth examination of outsider art is beyond the scope of this paper, what follows is a brief overview of the genre, its connections to disability arts history and the early recognition of disabled artists. The term “outsider art” was coined by Roger Cardinal in 1972 as an extension of French artist Jean Dubuffet’s concept of “art brut,” roughly translated to English as “raw art.” Dubuffet’s conception of art brut was deeply rooted in the artistic works of institutionalized individuals, often people living with experiences of mental illness, madness or neurodivergence, whose work he valued for its innocence or naiveté, whereas Cardinal’s interest in outsider arts encompasses the work of marginalized artists more broadly (Rhodes, 2013). Art history scholar Colin Rhodes writes that Cardinal’s conception of outsider art could be “any work of art produced by an untrained idiosyncratic artist who is typically unconnected to the conventional art world – not by choice but by circumstance” (2013). For Cardinal, this untrained quality makes the work more “authentic” as it is not being “predetermined by a set of rules and aesthetic judgements developed by the elite and imposed by existing systems of education in art” (Nelson, 2016, p. 101). Today, neurodivergent artists, particularly theatre performers, contest the description of “unbridled authenticity” for it presumes that they are unable to act or perform as anyone other than themselves (Reason, 2018).

While a number of artists have received significant attention for their art under the outsider label, the power dynamics engrained within the outsider arts structure are undeniably problematic. Firstly, the label of outsider artist is often imposed by an insider or curator rather than self-selected, therefore

⁵ Johnson and McRuer (2014) coined the term cripistemology (crip+epistemology) as a means of addressing ways of knowing and navigating the world through the experience of disability.

minimizing an artist's ability for self-representation. This extends to the paradigm of a self-taught artist being "discovered" by an insider who holds institutional power and positions the outsider artist as lower-than and in some ways indebted to those who "discovered" them. Further, outsider art is, as argued by Nelson (2016), rooted in "the ongoing fetishization of the artists' biographies rather than celebration of the artists' works" (p. 102), thus diminishing the artistic value that these artists have to offer.

Disability art is also interested in artists' lived experience of disability, although more as a response to and reframing of the outsider arts model. In this way, disability art aims to honour the artists' lived experience and agency as well as their unique artistic aesthetic, practice, and work. As Carrie Sandahl (2016) notes, "disability art reflects the move toward self-determination in the cultural arena; disabled artists are consciously reshaping the media that have always shaped them in the public sphere." Although outsider art and disability art approach the disabled artist differently, there are intersections and overlaps that complicate the distinctions between these approaches.

In her keynote speech at *Crippling the Arts*, Geetha Moorthy, founder and executive director of the South Asian Autism Awareness Centre (SAAAC), offered an approach to art and disability that arguably treads the line between outsider art and disability art. Below is a brief overview of her speech, "From Creative to Cognitive: Supporting Autism Through the Arts."⁶

To begin, Moorthy explained that the aim of her keynote address would be to demonstrate the ways in which "the arts can play a role in autism care" and more specifically, how arts practice is conducted at SAAAC (Moorthy, 2019). Moorthy discussed her background as a traditionally trained dancer in Sri Lanka and her family's arrival to Canada as refugees in the early 1980s. Shortly after, Moorthy opened her own dance company dedicated to teaching children the traditional dance and movement styles that she learned growing up. In 2007, Moorthy was approached by a small group of mothers who asked if she would be willing to teach their autistic children to dance. Moorthy explained that although she knew very little about autism at this time, she accepted and began teaching this group of children in the basement of her home. In 2008, she founded SAAAC.

Moorthy's keynote highlighted the various arts programming facilitated by SAAAC, and the skills that SAAAC aims to teach through the arts such as following multi-step directions, gaining comfort with social interactions, eye-contact, and communicating through facial expressions. Moorthy's talk emphasized teaching and learning these "normative" social skills and behaviours as being a significant element of SAAAC's practice. She articulated how, through this learning, students are being "given a voice," as well as how the arts (both visual and performing) are used benefit the goals of

⁶ Moorthy's keynote from *Crippling the Arts* is available to watch online through Creative Users Projects YouTube page: <https://youtu.be/xiwACbRjPw0>

therapeutic interventions such as speech therapy or Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) (Moorthy, 2019).⁷ The SAAAC approach to working with neurodivergent people focuses on how the arts can be a tool for achieving more normative interpersonal and life skills as well as building artistic employment opportunities to program participants. The arts, according to Moorthy, is a therapeutic approach to nurturing normativity.

Art as therapy has been widely critiqued within the Canadian disability arts movement. As Gorman suggests, “it is not the therapy *per se* that is the problem, but the institutional practices that position disabled people as being in need of development (social, psychological, or functional) and non-disabled counsellors (sometimes in the form of art therapists and art animators) as providing rehabilitation/therapeutic services intended to address these developmental deficits” (2007, pp. 47-48). Through this lens, SAAAC’s approach can be understood to use artistic practices to assimilate or dampen the autistic markers of participants with the intent of reducing stigma through such “normalization” (Oliver, 1990). Moorthy emphasized the perceived benefits of artistic practice for individuals on the autism spectrum and its potential to “empower and build self-esteem” (Moorthy, 2019). Throughout her presentation, she projected photos and video clips of SAAAC participants smiling and laughing. However, the opportunity for these students to represent themselves or comment about their unique experience remained absent.

In stark contrast to the rest of the *Crippling the Arts* programming, which focused on the work and experiences of disabled artists from a disability culture perspective – a perspective that centres the autonomy, politics, desires, and intentions of disabled, mad, and Deaf artists – Moorthy’s presentation demonstrated an approach that focused on creating culturally-specific social and artistic opportunities for their students to build “normative skills” and minimize autistic behaviours. Yet while aspects of SAAAC’s approaches to art and education may be controversial and depart from a disability cultural perspective, particularly its emphasis on the importance of disability leadership, SAAAC is recognized for the work it does to create opportunities for autistic people while confronting ableism, disablism, and imperialism in culturally specific ways. In a 2014 interview for CBC News, Gowri Kobrikrishna, parent of a teenaged SAAAC student, highlighted her

⁷ Applied Behaviour Analysis or ABA is most widely described as “the process of systematically applying interventions based upon the principles of learning theory to improve socially significant behaviours to a meaningful degree” (Baer et al., 1968, p. 91). This practice is often used as a tool to “treat” children with autism, and more specifically “teach social, motor, and verbal behaviours, as well as reasoning skills” (Autism Canada, n.d). ABA therapy is highly criticized by many autistic people and other members of the Neurodiversity Movement community as a form of abuse for the ways in which it enforces normative behaviours and actions and punishes those deemed non-normative. A number of autism advocates and bloggers, such as Lydia X. Z. Brown, Max Sparrow, Ido Kedar and Amethyst Schaber have offered insightful critiques of ABA.

family's experience of the stigmatization of autism in their community, and the positive impact that SAAAC has had on their whole family. She states,

It's really helpful and we get together and we share our experience, we have someplace to go... Before that, we didn't find a program that [my son] could fit in. And even us parents, we have a place to go and socialize and we are laughing, which we never did before. (CBC News, 2014, n.p)

Moorthy's keynote surfaced a productive tension within contemporary disability justice discourse that calls for more expansive and intersectional understandings of the disability experience as shaped by race, culture, gender, class, etc. (Berne et al., 2018; Erevelles, 2011; Mingus, 2011; Puar, 2017). By adopting an intersectional understanding of disability, we respond to Chris Bell's call to push against "white disability studies" (2006). It is essential not to position a white, western perspective as the "default" or "correct" reference point for disability experience but rather consider the important ways that disability experience manifests differently across communities (Bell, 2006; Connor et al., 2016; Erevelles, 2011; Waldschmidt, 2019).

SAAAC's methodologies may not align with my own, but they do remind me of how important it is to acknowledge the value inherent in different experiences and perspectives. From this position, I now explore practices of inter-abled collaboration and interdependent approaches to artistic creation.

To Inclusion and Beyond: Inter-abled Collaboration in Canada

More representation of neurodivergent artists and their collaborators is necessary within disability arts spaces, but the inclusion of these artists needs to be approached mindfully. It is not enough to simply widen the margins of who and what can be understood under the disability arts umbrella. Rather, we must consider what greater inclusion of neurodivergent artists and their collaborators within disability arts might *do* for this sector. How might neurodivergent artists disrupt current disability arts culture, practices, and protocols in ways that push the movement forward? What unique artistic aesthetics and ways of navigating creative processes might be developed? Conversations about access and inclusion, disability aesthetics and accessible practices are ever evolving. What do neurodivergent experiences of disability bring to the table? In what follows I highlight three examples of Canadian-based neurodivergent/non-disabled artistic collaborations; each one brings a unique approach to artistic practice. I consider the impacts of having neurodivergent artists at the helm of collaborative creative projects and what these inter-abled collaborations have to offer Canada's disability arts community more broadly.

Niall McNeil and Marcus Youssef – Vancouver

On the West coast of Canada, Niall McNeil, a playwright and performer with Down syndrome has been involved in the British Columbia theatre community since he was a child. His most recent plays, *Peter Panties* (2011) and *King Arthur's Night* (2017) were co-written with Siminovitch prize-winning playwright Marcus Youssef. As I will demonstrate, McNeil and Youssef's artistic relationship highlights the possibilities of interdependent creation processes. Following its world premiere at Toronto's Luminato Festival in 2017, *King Arthur's Night* travelled to Ottawa and was presented at Canada's National Arts Centre. In 2018, the production had its hometown premiere as part of the Vancouver's PuSh International Performing Arts Festival, and in early 2019 this play was programmed at No Limits at the Hong Kong Arts Festival (Newworld Theatre, n.d.). McNeil and Youssef's work pushes a number of boundaries, challenges preconceived notions about who creates professional theatre, and demonstrates the potential for international success for neurodivergent artists. In addition to onstage success, *King Arthur's Night* and *Peter Panties* were published in 2018 as a two-play collection, *King Arthur's Night and Peter Panties: A Collaboration Across Perceptions of Cognitive Difference* (McNeil & Youssef, 2018). In the introduction for the book, Youssef writes about how he came to work with McNeil, the methodologies that they use for devising new work interdependently, and the impact that their collaborations have had on him and his artistic practice.

Youssef explains that his and McNeil's collaborative writing process works in many ways within the framework typically used in developing "verbatim theatre." Verbatim theatre is a form of documentary theatre in which plays are scripted exactly, word for word, from people interviewed about their lived experience with a certain topic. Interviews are typically audio recorded to ensure precise documentation and are later transcribed and excerpted into a script. For McNeil and Youssef's collaborative writing process, Youssef records all of his sessions with McNeil, recognizing that great ideas could come at any moment. Youssef notes in particular McNeil's incredible strength for association and creating connections between seemingly unrelated themes or concepts (McNeil & Youssef, 2018, pp. xvi-xvii). This artistic process, building connections through playwrighting, resonates with how McNeil makes sense of the world around him. Their practice aligns with McRuer and Johnson's (2014) concept of "cripistemologies" – both in the ways in which McNeil brings his own unique perspective to his work, and in how Youssef embraces McNeil's ways of knowing and navigating his lived experience as it manifests in their collective and interdependent writing process.

Highlighting the value of this artistic partnership Youssef writes,

[This work] has led to one of my most valued and rewarding collaborative relationships, one that demands my fullest presence and deepest, most authentic self. It has forced me to be more attentive not just to Niall's impulses, but also to my own. It has made me a better writer. (McNeil & Youssef, 2018, p. xxiii)

Youssef's reflection emphasizes that when interdependent collaboration is enacted with sensitivity and care it benefits all parties equally – artistically, professionally, and relationally. Creating work in collaboration between neurodivergent and non-disabled artists is not about charity or “giving back” to a marginalized community, but rather about embracing alternative ways of thinking, working, and being. Such collaborations offer new artistic terrain to explore mutually while challenging current artistic structures and breaking boundaries along the way.

Sol Express – Toronto

Sol Express has been pushing boundaries with regard to interdependent artistic practices and collaborations between neurodivergent and non-disabled artists since it was founded in 2007. Sol Express runs out of L'Arche Toronto, whose mandate is to celebrate the abilities of people with intellectual disabilities, foster a community that addresses the needs of their members, and embrace diversity across culture and background (L'Arche Toronto, n.d). Sol Express operates as an arts-focused day program for neurodivergent adults. Founded by performing artist Cheryl Zinyk in collaboration with core L'Arche community member Janet Munro, Sol Express was a response to the lack of training and performance opportunities for adults with intellectual disabilities in Toronto. Prior to starting Sol Express, Zinyk had performed in community productions with neurodivergent actors and noticed they were continually cast in small roles; their ability as performers not taken seriously. Driven to better understand and address this fissure, Zinyk invested in her own training and studied with various disability theatre organizations in Canada, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Ukraine. She returned to Toronto with both the desire to create theatre from the perspectives of artists with intellectual disabilities and the belief that this work could offer something refreshing and exciting to the wider performing arts community (C. Zinyk, personal communication, August 1, 2019).

To date, the Sol Express ensemble develops new skills by attending workshops with professional working artists and then works together to devise original works for the stage. For the past three years the ensemble has had their original plays staged as part of the Toronto Fringe Festival (Toronto Fringe, n.d.).⁸ The subject matter of these works reflects the interests of the ensemble and engages with topics such as cycles of life and seasons, the

⁸ *Seasons* (2017), *Birds Make Me Think About Freedom* (2018), *Red Knows* (2019).

history of the institutionalization of people with intellectual disabilities in Ontario, and the power of the spoken or written word. Collectively, L'Arche Toronto's institutional commitment to arts-based day programming for their community members, Zinyk's ongoing investment in the artistic skill development of neurodivergent theatre practitioners, as well as the Sol Express ensemble's unending desire to create and perform new work, demonstrates a framework of interdependence that is meaningful and generative for inter-abled collaboration.

Joe Jack et John – Montréal

Montreal's Joe Jack et John also demonstrates interdependence within their company's leadership and artistic development structures. Joe Jack et John is a theatre company that produces original multi-disciplinary work that combines video, dance, spoken word, and bilingualism with an artistic approach that is "deeply humanistic and inclusive" (Joe Jack et John, n.d.a). The company includes actors with intellectual disabilities, non-disabled actors, and people of diverse cultural backgrounds (Joe Jack et John, n.d.a). Founded by Catherine Bourgeois in 2003, Joe Jack et John has continued to produce work that pushes boundaries and challenges artistic norms.

Michael Nimbley, one of Joe Jack et John's veteran members, is a neurodivergent actor who has been collaborating and performing with the company for over 12 years. In 2018, Nimbley was invited to be Joe Jack et John's first artist in residence. During his residency, Nimbley began developing his first creative work, *Les Waitress sont tristes* (which translates from French to English as *The Waitresses are Sad*) (Joe Jack et John, n.d.b). As co-director (with Bourgeois), Nimbley created the concept of the *Les Waitress* and drives the play's themes, plot, structure, and aesthetics while working with the rest of the company to further develop the work through a collaborative devising process. While Nimbley and Bourgeois share the co-director role, Nimbley leads the creative decision-making (C. Bourgeois, personal communication, July 29, 2019). Bourgeois and Nimbley are learning to navigate this new and interdependent leadership relationship together through the creative process (C. Bourgeois, personal communication, July 29, 2019). Joe Jack et John's inclusion and support of the leadership and artistic vision of neurodivergent company members demonstrates a commitment to both the creative and professional development of these artists. It also surfaces a need for more leadership-focused professional development opportunities for neurodivergent artists within the Canadian disability arts and culture sector.

These three examples of inter-abled artistic collaborations offer a glimpse into some of the generative partnerships between neurodivergent artists and their non-disabled artistic allies. While each bring different strengths and priorities to their projects, they all share a commitment to continuing the

growth of inter-abled working relationships and approaches to creating interdependently. Most significantly, McNeil and Youssef, Sol Express, and Joe Jack et John resist any kind of vertical or top-down approach to their artistic partnerships, rather they aim to work in ways that are more horizontal, rhizomatic, and fluid in which each member of the group contributes and in turn benefits from the collective whole (Mar & Anderson, 2010). Each of these collaborations offers a unique insight into how inter-abled artistic work is developing in the Canadian context.

As my own practice-based, community-engaged work aligns with the practices and perspectives of the collaborators discussed above, I will now offer a brief example from my personal experience working in artistic collaboration with neurodivergent artists. I also examine how this has shaped my perception of disability arts more broadly.

Directing Towards Disability Arts and Community

In 2018/2019, I facilitated a multi-arts program for neurodivergent teens and adults in Toronto. The first few months of the program were straightforward – I would come up with a number of performing arts activities, crafts, facilitate collaboratively choreographed dance numbers, etc., and offer instruction in ways that I found were accessible for participants. I used the first few months of the nine-month program to get to know the participants, their needs, how they coped with stress and frustration, and what I could do to ensure their comfort and safety in my class. Once we had established a strong understanding of each other as people and as artists, it was time to dive deeper, to explore important topics that were relevant to their experiences as members of the disability community. “Self-advocacy” became our new buzzword. Some participants had never encountered this term before, so we took the time to unpack it and discuss what it might look like both in our class as well as in the community. My impulse to discuss advocacy with the group stemmed from the realization that neurodivergent artists like those participating in this program were not well represented in the disability arts and activism spaces I am allied with and often find myself in. I hoped that sparking conversation about advocating for one’s own needs and understanding the implications of such an action would be meaningful.

I offer this example to draw attention to a disconnect that I have noticed between neurodivergent artists in my classes and the wider, established disability arts community. I found that the neurodivergent artists I was working with were more inclined to seek inclusion and acceptance in non-disabled spaces, whereas my disabled artist friends and colleagues deeply value the sense of community they experience in disability arts community. I have been drawn to consider why this might be? Could these neurodivergent artists’ ability to pass as non-disabled drive them away from disability

centred spaces? Might they perceive disability centred spaces as restricting, or an attempt to box them in, limiting what they can and cannot do?

While I recognize the value and desire of fitting in and feeling accepted in *all* spaces, I also believe in the power of community and the benefit of being with a group of people who share many aspects of one's own lived experience. In Alison Kafer's book, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (2013), she highlights the ways in which disability culture evokes a powerful sense of community. She quotes Simi Linton who writes, "we are all bound together, not by [a] list of our collective symptoms but by the *social and political circumstances that have forged us as a group*" (cited in Kafer, 2013, p. 12, emphasis in original). While Linton reflects this strong sense of cohesion "forged" by the disability community, Kafer notes that it is essential to recognize "the ways in which those forgings have been incomplete, or contested, or refused" (p. 12). Here Kafer acknowledges the significance of finding community in disability culture, but also the importance of recognizing who may not be present or equally included.

In my work facilitating accessible arts programming for neurodivergent teens and adults I attempt to nurture a recognition of disability as a prideful identity. As an ally who shows up in support and solidarity, I can feel the strength of the disability community and believe the neurodivergent artists that I continue to support might find meaning in feeling that too, if they so choose. It is powerful to be welcomed and included in community space and I believe there to be great value in such cultural connections.

Conversations about disability identity and justice should be made accessible to all disabled people. My perspective echoes those of disability artists and activists who conceptualize disability justice work as intersectional, embracing cross-disability solidarity, interdependence, and working toward collective access (Berne et al., 2018; Mingus, 2011). Access includes access to physical space, community, culture, ideas, and conversations and should include a broad range of disabled people. It is particularly important to note the challenge of access when conversations become culturally specific to "insiders" or academics. Specialized language, tempo of speech, noisy or over-stimulating environments, and other needs of community members should all be considered when inclusion is prioritized. All voices, bodies, and minds should be welcomed and equally supported in engaging in critical conversations around disability art and the disability experience more broadly. Considering further the value of pursuing community inclusion, Carrie Sandahl (2003) writes about how queer and crip folx often endure similar experiences of isolation or stigmatization as "they are rarely born into queer or crip families, much less communities" (p. 36). I believe that Sandahl's connection between queer and crip identities and the value of community relations resonates with the issues that I am highlighting here: as neurodivergent people are rarely born into families in which there are other immediate family members with disabilities, feeling at home in a community of people with similar life experience is significant.

With all of this in mind, it must be considered that for neurodivergent artists to enter these spaces and conversations in a way that is accessible to them might mean in some cases also inviting and including their non-disabled collaborators. To refuse to be “in relationship” (Acton et al., 2019, p. 52) with non-disabled artists or supports, is in essence to exclude neurodivergent artists. Within the framework of disability arts culture and its alignment with disability justice organizing, I’m drawn to philosopher Hannah Arendt’s (1987) notion of collectivity which Bickel et al. (2011) describe as “that which engenders a form of power: not in terms of strength, violence or the law, but a power created through the ephemeral coming together in momentary gestures of speech and action” (p. 91). It is this idea of coming together, to offer support, guidance and community that is both so valuable, and yet missing for many neurodivergent artists and their collaborators who may find themselves positioned outside of disability arts and activist spaces.

Inter-abled Collaboration Internationally

Collaborations between neurodivergent and non-disabled artists are still relatively new in the scope of disability arts and culture in Canada, however they have a more established history and currency in other parts of the world. In this section I explore how inter-abled collaborations are approached and received in Europe, the United Kingdom (UK), and Australia.

In contrast to Canada’s current disability arts scene, neurodivergent artists are at the centre of both mainstream and disability-focused theatre productions across Europe (Schmidt, 2017). Further, the prevalence of neurodivergent performers working in the UK, Europe, and Australia prompts a consideration of what structures and methodologies are in place that have brought these artists into the spotlight in ways that many Canadian neurodivergent artists have yet to experience.⁹

I suggest that much of the success in bringing neurodivergent artists to the fore has been due to the acceptance of and investment in support personnel for these disabled artists. The role of “creative enabler” is a good example. A term developed by London’s Graeae Theatre Company, a creative enabler is described by Michael Achtman as “a support worker with skills and experience in the area practiced by the disabled artist. The artist can call on the creative enabler to assist in ways they could not ask of a general access support worker or personal assistant” (2014, p. 36). A creative enabler offers support to disabled artists in order to allow for more artistic autonomy and independence. The role of creative enabler is typically undertaken by a non-disabled artist and the goal is to provide support and guidance without

⁹ Some of the more well-known companies creating mainstream work with neurodivergent artists include Mind the Gap, Blue Apple Theatre, Access All Areas (UK), Theatre HORA (Europe), Back to Back Theatre (Australia).

necessarily offering artistic input – ensuring the that disabled artist maintains creative control. Other approaches to engaging in artistic-based support work exist too in which parameters of artistic support may be more fluid or collaborative. While some disabled artists may be seeking someone to be strictly a scribe or to assist with memorizing lines, others may desire more of an artistic partnership, looking to their artistic support worker as a collaborator or co-creator.

In her article for *Research in Drama Education (RiDE)*'s special issue on "International Perspectives on Performance, Disability and Deafness" (2017), Yvonne Schmidt explores a number of working models that facilitate artistic support for neurodivergent directors and artists in Europe. Schmidt is frank about the potential issues with this dynamic and the importance of being aware of "who is acting as a mouthpiece for whom, and who gets the final word during the creative process," which, she notes, "is too often 'shaped' or 'filtered' by non-disabled company directors" (2017, p. 446). Schmidt takes seriously the care and integrity required in inter-abled artistic relationships and calls for models of working that cultivate a greater understanding of the needs of neurodivergent artists as they navigate between maintaining their own artistic vision and utilizing the structures of support facilitated by non-disabled collaborators. Schmidt offers up what she calls a "spectrum of collaboration" (see Figure 1), which outlines a range of roles and their corresponding degrees of support. For example, an "Organiser" engages strictly in organizational duties and is not required to have any artistic background. A "Filter" actively participates in the creative devising process with a disabled artist and allows them to improvise and author the work. Schmidt explains that the Filter role is the one most commonly used to support theatre artists with cognitive disabilities in Europe. As a Filter, one collaborates with the disabled artist in facilitating a creative process and helps shape and form the work to create what audiences will eventually experience on stage. This approach resonates with the process McNeil and Youssef take up in their co-created productions outlined above.

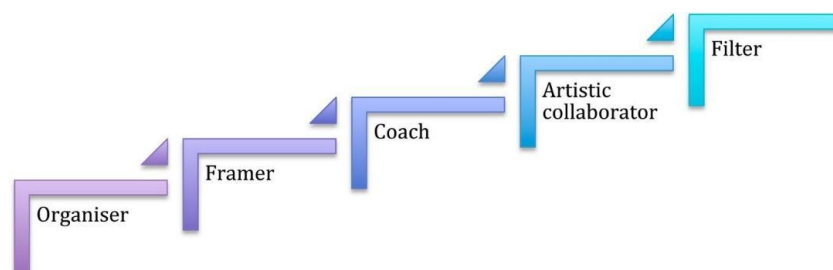


Figure 1. Spectrum of Collaboration (source: Schmidt, 2017).

Image description: Graphic of Schmidt's "spectrum of collaboration." The graphic delineates five collaborative roles that support artists with cognitive disabilities. The graphic appears as

steps moving upward from left to right and in gradient colour from purple to blue to teal. The colours and steps represent the increase in artistic involvement for each support role and move from least involved to most involved. The roles are: Organiser, Framers, Coach, Artistic Collaborator, and Filter (Schmidt, 2017, p. 450).

These roles, as outlined by Schmidt's spectrum of collaboration, provide disabled artists with options for what kind of support they want and need in order to produce their work. They also mark in varying degrees levels of artistic influence a support person might have in the process. Recognizing that there is no prescriptive way to offer support, these different roles offer options while stressing the need for communication and individualized approaches to support, similar to what one would need from any other kind of disability support worker. What I understand as the most important aspect of this work, regardless of the degree of artistic input, is recognizing how these forms of support foster inter-able collaboration, disability advocacy, and social justice practice.

A disability justice framework is useful to understanding the importance of interdependent relationships between neurodivergent artists and their non-disabled collaborators. As a practice and social movement, disability justice emphasizes the importance of disability leadership, intersectionality, collective access, cross-disability solidarity and interdependence (Berne et al., 2018). Disability justice's emphasis on collective access and cross-movement solidarity is relevant to honouring all experiences of disability and putting value on the various ways in which neurodivergent people participate and contribute to artistic life and to the disability justice movement. Berne et al. (2018) write,

We are committed to breaking down ableist/patriarchal/racist/classed isolation between people with physical impairments, people who identify as 'sick' or are chronically ill, 'psych' survivors, and those who identify as 'crazy,' neurodiverse people, people with cognitive impairments, and people who are of a sensory minority, as we understand that isolation ultimately undermines collective liberation. (p. 228)

This commitment emphasizes the need for acceptance and value of all disability experiences within both society at large and within the disability community itself. Positioning all disability experiences as valid and valuable, and including neurodivergency explicitly, will move all people toward collective liberation. Collective liberation emphasizes the need for disability justice to develop and progress while also ensuring that "no body/mind is left behind" (Berne et al., 2018, p. 229). For instance, within the context of my argument about the importance of inter-able collaborations, creative enablers (or similar support personnel) can help to ensure that neurodivergent artists are welcome in community events and art spaces and can participate fully, comfortably, and therefore are not left behind.

As a non-disabled artist support worker and advocate, I feel strongly that non-disabled artist allies be cognizant of the impact our involvement may

have on artists' processes and work, the privilege that we hold within artistic spaces, and what implications these things have on the disability arts community. Personally, I see myself as an outsider coming into disability arts spaces and make sure to be clear about my positionality as an ally, and my ongoing commitment to the community and the disability arts and culture movement.

As discussed throughout this paper, disability arts will benefit deeply from greater cross-disability solidarity by way of more intentional inclusion of neurodivergent artists in ways that support their creative practice. This often means the inclusion of inter-abled collaborations. While criticism of non-disabled collaborators working in disability arts spaces is worthy of further attention (Hargrave, 2015; Stephenson, 2019), I would simultaneously suggest the need to break away from the rigid understandings disability art as being exclusively disability-led. In loosening the parameters of the disability art designation to be more inclusive and accepting of interdependent and inter-abled collaborations, we may find an increase in neurodivergent representation in disability art spaces. As I have demonstrated, inter-abled collaborations offer enormous potential to include neurodivergent artists and cultivate complex and excellent artistic work. These ideas around disability leadership and its relationship to inter-abled support structures within disability arts served as a significant conversation point for the leadership roundtable at *Crippling the Arts 2019*, which I will now take up.

Crippling the Arts – Futures of Deaf and Disability Arts Leadership

I was privileged to moderate a roundtable conversation on disability arts leadership at the *Crippling the Arts Symposium* in January 2019.¹⁰ The artists that participated in this panel are considered leaders and forward thinkers in Canada's Deaf and disability arts communities. The panelists included Nicholas Herd, a performer with Sol Express; Sage Lovell, founder of Deaf Spectrum; Sean Lee, Director of Programming at Tangled Arts + Disability; Michael Nimbley, a performer and artist in residence with Joe Jack et John; and Catherine Bourgeois, Artistic Director of Joe Jack et John. I was thrilled to have been asked to facilitate this important discussion and very pleased to discover that two of the panelists were neurodivergent artists.

The inclusion of neurodivergent artists on a panel discussing leadership, which is often exclusive of this community was critical and led to a generative discussion. The discussion below highlights a few of the key ideas from our conversation.

Prior to the Symposium event, we panelists had the opportunity to meet with each other via video conference and discuss how each of us connected

¹⁰ The *Crippling the Arts Leadership Roundtable* is available in its entirety on the *Creative Users Project* YouTube channel (<https://youtu.be/tCphS1syIpo>).

with our roundtable topic – the future of Deaf and disability arts and Deaf and disability arts leadership in Canada. Together we came to a shared understanding that disability art is deeply connected to disability leadership, artistic autonomy, and self-advocacy. As a result of this initial conversation, we developed a list of key questions that we felt would spark a critical dialogue for our conversation at the Symposium. We discussed the importance of disability-led arts and culture, the significance of being assigned a disability arts designation, how current understandings of disability-leadership may unintentionally devalue creative relationships rooted in interdependent, inter-abled practices and how we might challenge or disrupt these understandings.

On the day of our roundtable discussion, I introduced our topic and each artist introduced themselves and offered some initial thoughts on leadership in Deaf and disability arts. Nicholas Herd articulated a number of insights about the importance of disability arts to him and for other artists in his community. He spoke passionately about his appreciation for the opportunities he has had to engage in training and performance practice. Herd also pointed to the lack of opportunities that would have been available to people like him (as a person with Down syndrome) less than 50 years ago given Canada's history of institutionalization of disabled people. Herd's enthusiasm for disability arts community and culture and his passion for this artistic work highlights further the value that neurodivergent community members can bring to the disability arts conversation. In his self-introduction, Michael Nimbley spoke about his passion for the performing arts. He noted that while he has had a number of jobs over his 62 years of life, he is pleased that his final professional career will be as a theatre artist. Nimbley spoke of his collaborative work with Catherine Bourgeois at Joe Jack et John and what his disability brings to their creative process:

Catherine does not know what it is to be disabled, she wants to understand. Even if I am slow when I am doing things, it is my way to express myself. I am able to make theatre and to write ... It doesn't matter if you have a disability. Disability is the reason why I do theatre. (Herd et al., 2019)

Nimbley's reflection is poignant – it is his disability and lived experience of neurodivergence that has given him the opportunity to train as an actor and to perform and direct with Joe Jack et John. I interpret his comments about Bourgeois as recognition of her artistic solidarity. While Bourgeois does not have lived experience of disability, her goal is to support and to understand Nimbley's artistic vision through ongoing collaborative engagement and investment in his professional artistic development. Both Herd's and Nimbley's comments emphasize the importance of fostering inter-abled or collaborative opportunities for neurodivergent artists to develop and create artistic work.

Our conversation continued and we shifted to discussions of disability leadership structures. Sean Lee, Director of Programming at Tangled Art +

Disability, noted that although Tangled prides itself on being the first entirely disability-led and run arts organization in Canada, they “have not very successfully included artists with intellectual disabilities as part of the leadership process” (Herd et al., 2019). Lee continued by commenting on the inherently disruptive nature of disability arts and the ways in which Tangled seeks to embody that perspective in the work that they produce and curate. In a moment of reflexivity, Lee contemplated how Tangled might expand its reach: “I think a really great first step is being fully disability led, but I think it means continuing to complicate it” (Herd et al., 2019). He suggested a need to push against predetermined notions of what kinds of disabled bodies and minds might be able to hold leadership positions and questioned what it would mean to view a leadership role as one that could work at a slower pace and resist traditional and ableist working structures that put significant value on timely and consistent production and output.

This leadership roundtable brought together people with various relationships to disability arts and culture. We collectively articulated the need to reframe how we presently conceive of the disability arts designation and questioned how future disability arts leadership might be reimagined and expanded to further embrace inter-abled, interdependent ways of working and creating.

Conclusions – Inter-abled Collaboration: Where do We go from Here?

There are no universal ways of knowing or understanding disability arts and culture. However, when we explore a variety of ways to navigate the inclusion of neurodivergent artists, inter-abled collaborations emerge as viable and integral parts of this world. Neurodivergent artists deserve full access to all that disability arts culture and community has to offer.

As someone who works in artistic practice with neurodivergent artists, I aim to facilitate entry points into disability arts culture and community through the art that we create interdependently. I hope that others who are currently participating in inter-able collaborations or are interested in doing so will consider exploring more deeply neurodivergent-driven ways of working and creating, while maintaining cognizance of how non-disabled privilege can so easily permeate and fill a creative space. Inter-abled collaborations can and do prompt innovation in practice and production and generate artistic excellence, as demonstrated in the examples above. As the representation of neurodivergence in Canadian disability arts is still emerging, I urge curators, directors, and event organizers to be mindful of whose work, voices, and perspectives are included and whose may be missing from the stages, pages, workshops, and tables where critical conversations are taking place. Further, I ask key stakeholders within disability arts to consider the ways in which interdependent forms of leadership may offer opportunity for more cross-disability solidarity,

innovative approaches for activating access, as well as more diverse representation within the Canadian disability arts and culture. The faithful disability rights movement maxim, “nothing about us without us” rings through. Fostering a Canadian disability arts culture that is inclusive, welcoming, and supportive of the needs of *all* community members will make for a culture that can create meaningful art together while continuing to fight for justice and inclusion for all members of the disability community.

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