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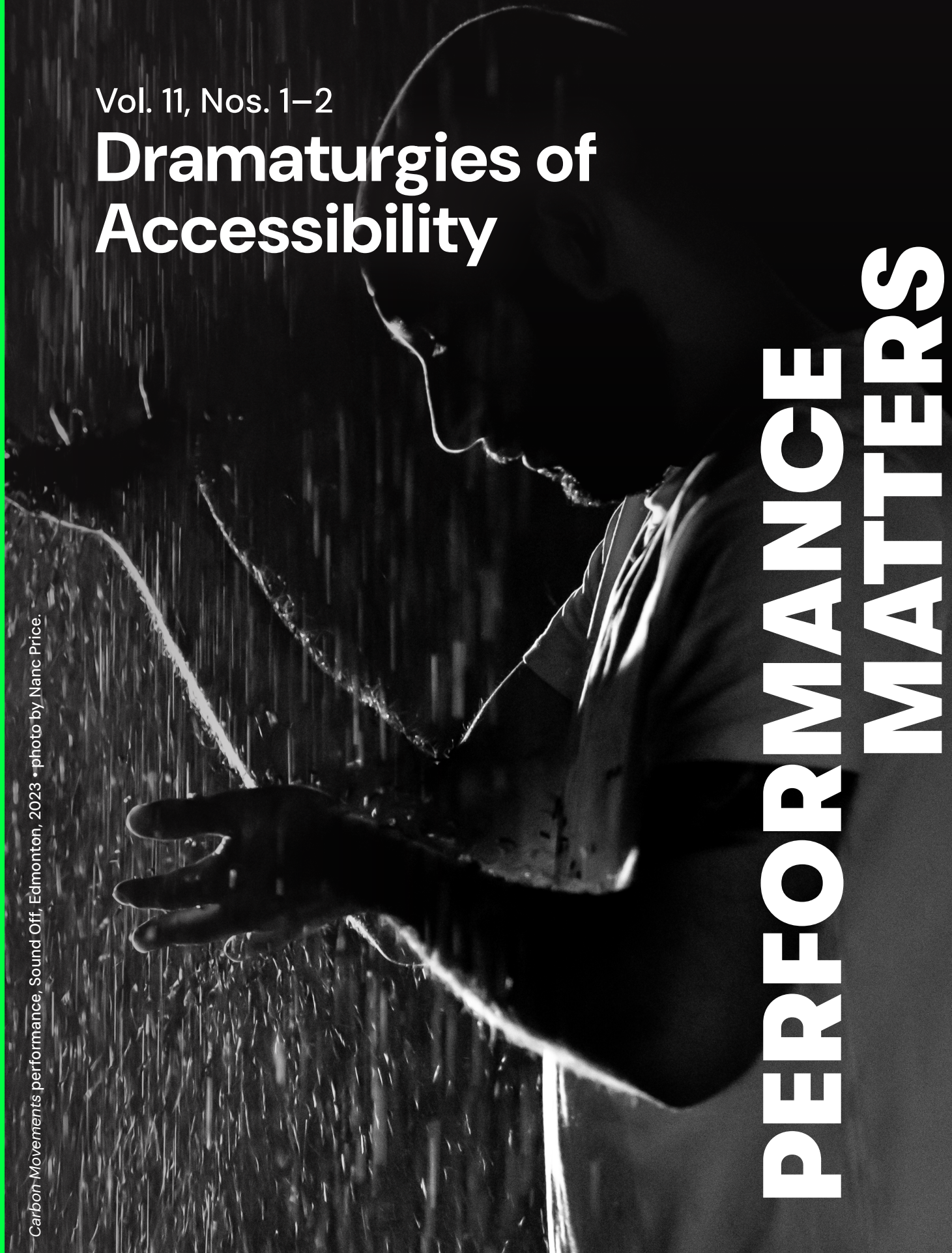
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Vol. 11, Nos. 1-2

# Dramaturgies of Accessibility

# PERFORMANCE MATTERS



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# Dramaturgies of Accessibility

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**PERFORMANCE MATTERS**

# Vol. 11, Nos. 1–2

## Dramaturgies of Accessibility

Issue Editors: Pil Hansen and Jessica Watkin

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# **Dramaturgies of Accessibility**

Pil Hansen and Jessica Watkin

## **Introducing**

In this editorial, we map what dramaturgies of accessibility become through the offers of contributing authors and the sources they draw on. Our aim is to support your navigation of this issue as readers/listeners and to build language for principles of use and inspiration in artistic practice, education, and research. In other words, we draw connections between articles and explain key ideas in service of a community of knowledge on dramaturgies of accessibility.

This journal issue is edited for access. Authors make efforts to (1) explain key concepts accessibly, (2) circle back to ideas repeatedly, (3) simplify and shorten sentences where possible, (4) provide meaningful image descriptions, and (5) make decisions about which senses and ways of knowing their language reflects. All articles feature both an original abstract and a plain language version of that abstract adapted by Kelsie Acton, so that every reader/listener can meet each article with an overview of its contents and aims in mind. Three articles are accompanied by video recorded American Sign Language translations by Amorena Bartlett. Four articles are either written texts paired with audio versions, voice recorded by Graham Percy, or an audio piece matched with a written transcript. This editorial is also accompanied by an article on editing for access. In that text, you can learn about the selective and distributed approach to access our editorial team found sustainable, read access service providers' practical guidelines for authors, and engage with their personal reflections on the process of creating accessible content.

## ***Our Invitation***

*From Dramaturgy ...*

Since the 2000s, dramaturgy has been expanded from building poetic worlds with (often Western/colonial) compositional models and staging concepts to working with principles for how to collaborate with one another, relate to environments, source creation in collective memories, engage embodied minds, challenge what we attend to, and much more. As Bojana Cvejić (forthcoming) and Pil Hansen (2022) observe in their recent books on dramaturgy, such principles often take the form of methods or procedures for generating performance, developed or adapted by collaborators through inquiry and research. As a result, dramaturgy increasingly invites us to ask questions about how we work. This opens a space for ethical consideration of how to reduce risks of harm, who benefits, how performers' gain agency to affect the work, and what it means to care for relations. Recent calls for "leave no trace" dramaturgy (Trencsényi 2022), a dramaturgy of "listening" (Rajendran 2023), and "relational ethics" in dramaturgical inquiry (see Lachance 2018; Hansen, forthcoming) bring voice to this development. These changes emerged out of performing art forms that rarely reflect a conventional Western poetic, such as experimental dance, devised theatre, performance art, sound art, Indigenous performance, and community-engaging art. At present, expanded dramaturgy has entered classrooms and become part of many artists' broader toolkit. "Dramaturgies of Accessibility" plants the following question in this rich ground: How do we (artists, educators, and researchers) place differently abled ways of experiencing at the shifting centres of our practices as we relate and engage with care? When held open as an ongoing invitation, this question may iteratively redefine the boundaries of the performing arts, expand perceptual registers, and confront the preconceptions of artists and audiences alike. Before we get that far, we would like to take you back to the beginning of such a journey: the basics of dramaturgy and accessibility.

"Dramaturgy is a way of making meaning and making people feel. People might see, hear, smell, or feel performance. So, dramaturgy is about making meaning and feeling through the senses" (Acton 2025). This beautiful plain language explanation, coined by Kelsie Acton, brings clarity to an aspect of dramaturgy that otherwise tends to remain elusive. When creating works, artists think about and intuit how spectators are invited to experience the work. In doing so, we consider who the spectators are and what references,

languages, and ways of experiencing they may bring to the performance. In the performing arts, supporting access typically means assuming a “normate,” nondisabled audience while creating and then adding points of access (e.g., subtitles, audio description, or relaxed shows) to the finished work to accommodate some of those who are disabled or have different ways of experiencing (see Hadley 2022, 183–85).<sup>1</sup> Every person’s embodied, sensory system places them at the centre of their world, and sharing that centre with community makes us feel that we belong. This dynamic partakes in the power of performance as a live and communal artform unless spectators are accommodated for peripheral access only. Shifting from access to accessibility expands who performances can engage meaningfully while enriching the expressive registers of performance works. When working toward accessibility, choices are made more deliberately about who we place at the centre. If the work, for example, is intended to be d/Deaf-centric, then deaf artists, language ecologies, and aesthetics are fully embedded in the creation process, and accommodations for hearing audiences are added to the finished work. This means that heightened attention to different ways of experiencing and communicating informs the creative methods and forms of collaboration from the very beginning of a creation process.

### *... to Accessibility*

When entering a theatre studio, access dramaturg Jessica Watkin always asks, “How best do you perform? In what way could we write your support into the script?” (2022, 38). In other words, she begins by asking how artists in the room work best. This basic dramaturgical principle redefines multiple constraints (limiting boundaries) relationally from the outset of a creation process with mixed ability or disabled artists. Instead of relying on an artistic vision to guide and constrain the choice of creation methods, access dramaturgy anchors such decisions in the strengths of each artist. The constraints of labour procedures are redefined by considering which roles and ways of working support the application of artists’ strengths instead of relying on industry standards for who does what, how, and when. Access

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<sup>1</sup> Footnote: The term “normate” was coined by Rosemary Garland-Thomson to describe a universalized type of person who enjoys privilege and is defined as a human against the “others” who are considered deviant (1997, 8). In popular use, the related term “normie” often refers to the typical behaviour and group dynamic of those whose experience and self-understanding fit the set of common denominators associated with average, normative cognitive and psychological functions.

support is also redefined as integrated ways of communicating, engaging, and organizing a workday rather than additions made to nondisabled norms. For example, if everyone works without shoes and uses structured floor tape and auditory spatial feedback to navigate space, a b/Blind artist will not need audio description or support personnel to move safely, their expressive strengths are enabled, and everyone gains an opportunity to expand their perceptual attention and navigational cues beyond the visual. With such constraints redefined, conversations about access support (including who within or outside the group of collaborators that can best provide it) are built into a strengths-based and nondisabling workspace.

Strengths-based approaches to disability and different ways of experiencing derive from a branch of affirmative (positive) psychology. In addition to supporting positive selfhood and abilities, these approaches acknowledge that by focussing on strengths, many challenges may not arise (Armstrong 2012, 14–23). An example is the ADHD-centric approach to teaching performance creation that Hansen developed with her team at the University of Calgary. The approach features small tasks, completed by partners taking turns to create and provide support. The work is done within in a relay structure that draws actively on the strengths of students with ADHD in dynamic social exchange, relational empathy, multitasking, and problem-solving. Aspects that can be challenging (such as task initiation and completion) are delegated to the structure and the partner setup (Hansen et al. 2025, 239–45). Like other areas of affirmative psychology, however, strengths-based approaches risk failing to validate the challenges disabled people encounter.

That is why strengths-based approaches often are considered complementary to a medical conception of disability, which tends to focus on deficits to provide remedial action. The aim of contemporary medical treatment is to help reduce symptoms that negatively affect disabled people. While that is appreciated, differentiating between negative and positive effects of disability requires individualized and contextually adaptive medicine, which a science based on large-sample statistics and a health sector that depends on standardized efficiency are rarely equipped to provide. This is one of the reasons why support offered within a medical system risks pathologizing and traumatizing disabled people (see Clough 2017).

A third, and in disability studies paradigmatic (presently widely adopted), conception of disability reflects social-constructivist theory. Here, disability is considered socially constructed by environments and norms that are disabling (see Collins et al. 2021, 309–11). This framework is useful to critique how contexts disable, and it has led to both theory and practical strategy for how artistic activism may insert subverting difference into normative spaces, or “crip” norms, by replacing them with the realities of disabled folks (Motley 2024, 58–62). A limitation of this activism is that social norms are rather change resistant, wearing down those who invest labour in making a positive difference. Another complication, raised by disability communities, is that there are challenges associated with some disabilities, such as fatigue from chronic pain, that social solutions cannot do much to address.

That said, most of us who are disabled know from lived experience that our difference and the ways in which we have learned to relate and provide care for one another trouble norms every single day (e.g., Michalko 2008, 401–2; Smilges 2023). In creative spaces, where there is room to both imagine and realize ways of being together with accessibility, we gain the power to be this trouble with care, generously mobilizing our strengths to enable everyone to experience and relate differently. In such spaces, we can begin with how we work best and explore ways of sensing, feeling, and making meaning together. In turn, this work models and advances dramaturgies of accessibility. Is this hopeful writing or a movement of change already underway? The community of knowledge of this issue provides a possible answer, which we return to summarize at the end of this editorial.

### ***The People and Work in This Space***

The authors of this issue have some characteristics in common and as many that differ. Authors hail from Canada/Indigenous Nations, the US, Australia, Italy, Denmark, and the UK. All articles are authored or co-authored by artists, educators, and/or scholars with disabilities or different ways of experiencing. At times, disabled authors serve as allies for authors with different disabilities and at times they are joined by nondisabled allies. For a time, we form a community of people who understand what living with disability can entail through our conditions or choices. These authors self-identify in a myriad of ways. When capitalized, “Deaf” and “Blind” often signal strong identification with those specific communities and their ecologies, whereas when lowercased, “deaf” and “blind” can refer to a broader spectrum of hearing or

visually impaired people. Identifiers like “Crip,” “Mad,” and “Disabled” reclaim historically derogatory terms and slurs to bring us out of the invisible margins and take up the space that our abilities deserve. Some elect to identify with a specific disability or condition with transparency (e.g., spinal disability, intellectual disability, bipolar disorder) to centre the ways of experiencing involved as a bridge for creative engagement and knowledge building. Others choose to name broader categories with the aim of articulating approaches that include a wider multiplicity of experiences while reducing cross-disability conflicts. Intersectoral experiences of Indigeneity, colonial heritage, race, gender, sexuality, and socio-educational circumstances flow through many articles.

Everyone shares their work here with generosity and vulnerability that invite curiosity and care from the reader/listener. The subject matters of the articles range from artistic practices with different approaches to integrated accessibility, through teaching accessibility using such practices, to researching artistic practices ethically with disabled artists and community members. The artistic practices discussed include dance, sound art, theatre, performance art, Indigenous performance, and interdisciplinary community art. The form of each article reflects the authors’ field: Some articles are artistic reflections, others blend artistic and scholarly forms, and some are scholarly. This journal issue embraces both overlaps and differences between the articles and authors as values needed to form a strong community of knowledge, inspiring dramaturgies of accessibility across related fields. As readers/listeners, you can browse to find useful practical strategies, discussions that expand points of view, and theoretical conceptions that inspire ideas.

## **Dramaturgies of Accessibility Become**

In the following, we revisit and nuance the basic aspects of dramaturgy and accessibility introduced above in the more specific context of the authors’ contributions.

### ***Awareness of How Disability Troubles Normative Ways of Working***

Although all contributors touch on this topic, three articles attend at length to how disability troubles nondisabled spaces and their social norms. The authors offer examples of the fissures they produce through such trouble as

artists, community animators, and educators. In her discussion with Jill Carter in “Fragments Are Enough: Re-Stor(y)ing the ‘Wasteland,’” Jessica Watkin talks about resisting wholeness and embracing a dramaturgy of fragmentation that reflects how Blind people perceive. By not defining a whole (e.g., a vision or concept) at the outset, dramaturgical work can be led by listening to fragments offered by the people in the room, connecting and reconnecting relationally, while disrupting the visual world. In “Improvising Fugitive Access: Drafting Care in a Disability Arts and Culture Classroom,” Jose Miguel Esteban invites us to witness his dance of improvising through gestures of failure as a university educator. Instead of subscribing to stories about the brokenness of Mad people or the wholeness of nondisabled expertise, he aims for a practice of “sharing in draft,” of not assuming to know or deliver completion. As he works and moves in iterative cycles of revision as an instructor, Esteban hopes that holes poked by the despair of anxiety and depression become openings for leaking into the norm and being the trouble (Motley 2024, 60–62; Michalko 2008, 401–2). Petra Kuppers and her collaborators invite community members to imagine accessible futures as kin by engaging in communal dreaming and touch through arts practices, often in public spaces where they may insert their differences as a community resource (Haraway 2016, 99–103). They share this practice in “Somatic Care Performances: Turtle Disco and Tendings.” Their work oscillates between writing, sounding, and moving in ways that give personal comfort, and momentarily leaving that comfort zone to be guided empathetically into another fellow disabled person’s ways of experiencing and engaging with environments. Inspired by Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018, 149), Watkin suggests that dramaturgies of accessibility demonstrate a future in which disability has worth and different ways of experiencing are validated. Indeed, within the performative reality of such creative processes and works, the future with accessibility that we imagine becomes “presenced” reality for a time.

Once norms are troubled, practices that reflect different ways of experiencing—and “leak” encounters with pain and ableism—have opened up possibilities. Our authors provide evidence of emerging reciprocal empathy and adaptation in creation spaces. In these examples, different ways of experiencing are often centred to strengthen both the reach and replicability of the “presenced” accessibility our authors enact.

### ***Working and Learning with the People in the Room***

All contributions reflect on what creative collaborators bring into the room and how ways of working are determined and adapted in response. For example, in *“Carbon Movements: Relational Dramaturgy in Deaf and Hearing Dance Creation,”* Connor Yuzwenko–Martin, Ainsley Hillyard, and Pil Hansen share how their process of creating a vibrotactile dance work began with a Deaf theatre performer and a hearing choreographer learning Deaf and choreographic languages from one another. At first, the choreographer relied on an ASL translator, and the performer relied on movement exercises with instructions. Gradually as they learned, they adapted the process to communicate more directly, which in turn empowered the Deaf performer to make meaningful dramaturgical movement choices in response to choreographic prompts. This circumvented the language hierarchies that otherwise arise in mixed hearing dance collaborations (Hodge 2020, 66–68). Through this reciprocal adaptation process, the work was created from signs, movement, interaction, and play with vibration technology—rendering the resulting work an example of Deaf–centric creation and fully integrated accessibility. A comparable process unfolded when James Long, Amy Amantea, and Nico Dicecco based their creation of an interactive theatre work on the ways that a blind photographer in their group, Amantea, experiences environments and people. As the authors describe in *“Through My Lens: An Act of Telling in Exchange,”* a process unfolded of sighted collaborators inquiring into Amantea’s perception and trying to represent it visually and performatively. This process ended up being intentionally reconstructed with the audience during performance. The creators did, for example, devise a scenario for audience interaction that indirectly provides the information Amantea needs to construct a multifaceted impression of another person, which she then fed back to them. As a result, hearing collaborators and audiences learned to confront sighted assumptions and Amantea discovered ways of teaching blind imaging performatively.

In addition to such inquiry and open curiosity, there are multiple preconditions for reciprocal learning in mixed–ability collaborations and research that our authors share and discuss. Building places of enabling comfort for each collaborator, like in the case of Kuppers and colleagues, or articulating how one works best, as in Watkin’s dramaturgical practice, are important to establish a baseline at the outset. From this place, collaborators can build accessibility in a shared space through reciprocal learning and

adaptation, if the methods of creating are kept responsive. In the two cases of Yuzwenko–Martin, Hilliard, and Hansen and Long, Amantea, and Dicecco, this responsiveness actively centred the strengths of the Deaf and blind artists, counterbalancing the burden of adaptation disabled artists shoulder in nondisabled spaces.

Another important precondition for accessibility in mixed–ability collaboration is to address the ways in which assumed frameworks for disability art can bar agency and opportunity. Julia Hales and collaborators initiated a creative research project to explore how disabled and nondisabled dance artists might best work together. Insights from this project are shared in “The Together Research: Exploring Equity and Autonomy in Disability–Led Performing Arts Research in Western Australia.” They discovered that hierarchies, which assume that “professional” nondisabled dancers lead workshops and facilitate the work, were a hindrance. The work became richer when artists with lived experience of disability also led and facilitated creation sessions. With a related focus on agency, in “Cognitive Accessibility, Ethics, and Rights in Research,” Matthew Reason, Kelsie Acton, and Daniel Foulds share approaches developed to involve participants in a repeated process of consent when doing research with learning/intellectually disabled artists. They offered multiple points of access (e.g., video, comic strips) and framed consent in terms of rights. The artists felt enabled to exercise their rights in making choices about how to work when their understanding of the rights was shaped through artistic means, like theatre sketches or movement gestures.

Multiple authors recognize that reciprocal adaptation is more readily available among disabled artists than among mixed–ability collaborators because of what Mia Mingus (2011) has coined “disability intimacy” (a tendency to tune into the needs of other access deserving people deriving from one’s own lived experience with disability). Examples in this journal issue articulate the effort that “tuning in” requires when drawing on disability intimacy with awareness of people’s different histories. For example, in “*Mad Conductors: Pathways of Attention*,” Stephanie Heit and Alexis Riley share their ongoing journey as survivors of the psychiatric system who develop performance–based methods to engage collectively with memory loss and enhance the vibrancy of memory fragments. Through disability intimacy, they recognize how isolating the experience of losing memory to depression,

institutionalization, and psychiatric treatment can be. As mad conductors offering home visits to build communal autobiographical memory, they therefore begin by learning how to meaningfully take their lead from the person calling on them.

### ***Expanding Ways of Imagining, Communicating, and Sensing***

Heit and Riley deliberately activate multiple senses in their work and source this work in songs, images, stories, or sites that are of significance to the Mad participant(s) they serve. They engage memory fragments through embodied, multisensory improvisation with sounds, touch, and movement to make those memories vibrate and to build collective memory with them. In other words, they expand what can be imagined in extension of the fragments and make it real through embodied collective action. When the participants in Reason, Acton, and Foulds's research project devised gestures to express rights for a consent process, this similarly ensured that the rights were understood in shared, kinaesthetic ways (perceived through the body's motor system) that made the rights feel both actionable and collective.

Sensory strategies can also reflect ways of perceiving and experiencing that people with specific sensory disabilities or differences enhance over time. Yuzwenko–Martin, Hilliard, and Hansen used vibration technology to establish how an environment reacts to a performer's actions on stage. Sensory devices, such as vibrating engines under a dance floor or vibration belts worn by spectators, invited d/Deaf people to draw on their enhanced ability to perceive vibration and offered hearing spectators an assisted opportunity to tune in and learn how to attend to vibratory information. Joanne Weber and her co-researchers explored a range of such deaf-centric dramaturgical characteristics ethnographically and share results in "Tracking Deaf Aesthetics in Deaf Spaces: Dramaturgical Decisions for Plays by Deaf-Led Teams." They found that deaf aesthetics tend to be occularcentric (centring vision), multimodal (working across physical, gestural, object-based, drawn, written, signed, and vibratory forms), and invite spectators to interactively draw on their imagination to construct relatable narratives. The authors offer rich examples of how accessibility emerges as an organic aspect of this aesthetic, also for deaf newcomers to Canada who experience language deprivation. Here, "deaf gain" is defined as a widening of sensory registers and imagination to the world that deaf people are embedded within.

Centring blind imagining in parallel ways, in “Sighted Assumptions to Blind Imaginings: Decentring Vision as Unexpected Dramaturgy,” the access dramaturg Alex Bulmer describes situations in her artistic career that were catalytic for developing multisensory strategies based on how blind artists and audiences experience. Bulmer was sighted before she became blind and is therefore repeatedly confronted with limitations for how to navigate space and interactions caused by sighted assumptions. Only by decentring vision did she become able to unlock blind imagination as a source for dramaturgical invention. Bulmer supports blind artists as they “perform to ears, hands, and feet.” She offers examples that are situated in creation projects, including transforming worlds by saying so, inviting audiences to touch or create props, and navigating by textured floor tape or directional sounds. Bulmer’s passion for discovery and innovation that decentres visual perception mirrors the motivation behind an artistic residency that Giuseppe Comuniello, Flavia Dalila D’Amico, and Camilla Guarino co-facilitated and reflect on in “The Artistic Access Residency Creazioni Accessibili: Audio Description Dramaturgy in Contemporary Dance.” This residency invites dance artists to work with blind and seeing co-dramaturgs and blind test audiences to adapt a dance work for accessibility. They begin by identifying points of dramaturgical resonance between choreographic principles in the dance work and access techniques. These points are then explored creatively to adapt access and choreography reciprocally. For a duet with an improvisation system, the residency identified parameters for what live audio describers attended to and the perspective they applied. In performance, audio describers shifted between these parameters, cued by changes in the dancers’ interaction. The perspectives included both the audience’s field of view and the dancers’ multimodal perception. Focal points produced such accounts as intimate sensory impressions, interpretations of visual images, and technical description of movement. Thought also went into ensuring audience access to sounds from the environment while listening to audio description. The residency is an example of how integrated accessibility can be achieved by nondisabled artists when drawing openly on the expertise of artists and audiences living with disability (see Bläsing and Zimmerman 2021).

### ***Working with the Aesthetics, Ethos, and Rigorous Practices of Accessibility***

The main difference between the dramaturgy of accessibility of the *Creazioni Accessibili* and the work of Weber’s team and Bulmer is whether the creation

is based on blind or deaf aesthetics at the outset. What follows is a difference in whether decentring nondisabled norms is a creation method and objective or a productive challenge that emerges when adapting for accessibility. Many of our authors prioritize educating nondisabled collaborators and spectators in how they may crip their reality. Long, Amantea, and Dicecco; Bulmer; Yuzwenko–Martin, Hilliard, and Hansen; and Carter and Watkin advocate for doing so with the ethos of kindness and open curiosity that characterize Comuniello, D’Amico, and Guarino’s work. From these contributions, it is evident that nondisabled artists’ efforts toward accessibility are encouraged and supported by disabled artists. Such allied dramaturgies of accessibility are considered complementary to disability–led projects.

Both the ethos and the conception of disability aesthetics discussed here have been integrated in the curatorial framework for the National Creation Fund in Canada by Shay Erlich and Sarah Conn. The fund supports large–scale productions, which is a format that artists living with disability rarely reach due to multiple barriers (Collins et al. 2021, 316–22). In “Rigorous Dreaming: Curatorial Practices for Large–Scale Disability Performance,” Erlich and Conn share the key principles of the work they do to address these barriers and incentivize “rigorous dreaming” among applicants who apply dramaturgies of accessibility. They encourage all applicants to explain how, and to what extent, they meaningfully integrate accessibility in relationships between creators, choice of working methods, and approach to audience engagement. To equitably consider proposals that centre accessibility, Erlich and Conn separate (often normative) conceptions of rigour from aesthetics. This is both to consider how rigorous practices are constituted iteratively in response to the people in disability–led spaces and to discover the aesthetic and artistic visions such practices produce.

### ***Weaving and Re–stor(y)ing to Produce Accessible Realities***

Much like artistic visions, compositional principles tend to emerge out of the integration of accessibility in process dramaturgy and in how experiences are offered to audiences. In the case examples and discussions our authors provide, compositional principles are arrived at with heightened awareness of how they (1) are sourced in lived experiences and contexts, (2) bind collective imagination to produce realities, and (3) establish relational dynamics with people(s) and environments that have ethical dimensions.

Alongside experiences and histories of disability, compositional work tends to be sourced in (inspired by) intersectional and environmental topics, such as racialization, Indigenous ways of knowing, queering, and ecological sustainability. Yuzwenko–Martin, Hilliard, and Hansen use d/Deaf aesthetics to establish a nonextractive relationship between a dancer and an environment that is comprised of black grain. Vibrating floor sections destabilize the dancer and erase patterns he draws in the grain until he begins to attend and relate. This vibratory action–reaction pattern was discovered while exploring movement responses to d/Deaf languages and became the leading compositional principle for the work. The memory fragments Heit and Riley enhance performatively with Mad participants often reconstruct connections with environments of significance to the individual. Attending to that environment therefore becomes the compositional anchor. An example is spending time together, attending to a tree that a person remembers until vibrating feelings of belonging are embedded in the memory. These are examples of relational dramaturgy that depend on efforts to attend (listen) to environments.

Restoring lost Indigenous land–based and ancestral memory is a topic that Carter brings up in conversation with Watkin. Drawing on Erica Violet Lee’s wasteland theory and Judith’s Butler’s work, Carter points out that both Indigenous and disabled people are relegated to the margins because their ways of living inhibit unbalanced resource extraction. These people have been taught that their lives are not whole and, therefore, not of value (Lee 2016; Butler 2016, 197). Carter curates a pedagogical incubator where students and artists engage in Re–stor(y)ing and Ceremony (see Dion 2022, 19, 100–102). To move from a state of not knowing, shaped by colonial devaluation, to a state of knowing the worth of themselves and their fellow beings, the group engages with stories and names places that have been lost or paved over. Methods of Re–stor(y)ing analyzed in Carter’s previous work include compositional principles drawn from traditional Indigenous weaving practices (2016). Through this work, everybody is regarded as an important fragment that sustains a whole, braided through story. Carter and Watkin offer dialogue as a method to discover resonant principles in Indigenous dramaturgies and dramaturgies of accessibility. They argue that tending fragments, like both Blind and Indigenous artists do, can teach us all to listen with care. Doing so may presence accessibility in restorative ways.

A related notion of continuously knitting together people and places emerges as the compositional principle behind performance engagements in Koppers and colleagues' contribution. Working with community members in public sites, they approach knitting as a method to both (1) forge affirmative connections between disabled people and (2) crip social spaces with celebrations of disability pleasure and belonging. Suspended in the normative fabric of academic spaces that fail to include Mad and racialized people, Esteban characterizes "writing in draft" as working the connective tissue of a spiderweb (see Nakasue 2023, 1). If he pulls one string, it affects the whole web. Esteban understands his choice of playing such strings differently as a practice of both causing trouble by leaking Madness and producing "fugitive" escape routes for safety as a racialized person (see Sciullo 2019). In these cases, a dramaturgy of care also means creating safe spaces and exits so that we can be the trouble with protection.

### ***Paying It Forward***

For the community of knowledge in this journal issue, dramaturgies of accessibility become:

- (1) starting creation with the artists in the room: their strengths, how they work best, and what supports them;
- (2) centring creative work in those artists' ways of experiencing through a learning process where collaborators adapt reciprocally as they develop novel methods for engaging, expressing, and performing across abilities;
- (3) developing compositional principles and ideas for how to affect audiences that use the discovered ways of engaging and expressing to explore intersectional and environmental subject matter;
- (4) doing so with awareness of how it troubles normative ways of working;
- (5) being that trouble with care for that which hurts, for relations between people and environments, and for comfort or exits to safety;
- (6) tending to fragmented perceptions and memories, connecting them and making them vibrate together;
- (7) making dreams of accessibility reality through our creative work, agency, and rights;
- (8) sharing the aesthetic and dramaturgies of accessibility this produces.

As editors, we have introduced topics, concepts, and approaches that multiple contributions discuss while leaning in with a "yes and" attitude. We encourage readers/listeners to lean in too, and doing so with awareness of

your own bias, before engaging in equally important critical reflection. Like everyone else, disabled and ally authors are biased, formed by ideologies, theoretical frameworks, artistic cultures, and individual experiences. At times this leads us to generalize based on unique case experiences as we aim to expand our lived reality and “presence” accessibility. It may also cause us to interpret such experiences in ways that affirm a theory or an artistic intention. Both tendencies produce value within limitations. Authors therefore aim to be transparent and rely on the reader/listener to consider these parameters and their limitations when leaning in and eventually arriving at their own critical interpretation and “yes and” ideas for practical application.

With this editorial dramaturgy of leaning in with care, “Dramaturgies of Accessibility” enables positive theorizing to imagine accessible realities that render norms porous and destabilized. Once the ground has been thus prepared, the authors in this issue move far beyond hopeful thinking and develop dramaturgies of accessibility with conceptual frameworks and practical strategies to draw on. This means that you too can contribute to this community of knowledge by bringing practices of reciprocal adaptiveness and relational care into creation spaces, applying approaches read about, developing dramaturgies of accessibility with your colleagues, and sharing them with the rest of us for inspiration.

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# Editing for Access: Practices and Reflections

Amorena Bartlett, Kelsie Acton, Graham Percy, and Pil Hansen

## Our Approach to Editing for Access

A central editorial question Pil Hansen and Jessica Watkin asked, prior to distributing their call for proposals, concerned which forms of access would be effective for different access-deserving groups and were realizable within their limited resources.<sup>1</sup>

Accessible publishing can seem out of reach for small, independent publishers for multiple reasons: Such publishers tend to be hosted by a university department and rely on editors' volunteer labour, graduate assistant stipends, and a small grant to cover basic expenses. In other words, independent publishers rarely have the time, resources, and capacity required to fully include access-deserving authors and users (readers/listeners). Our approach to editing for access aims to reduce barriers for (1) users and authors with disability and different ways of experiencing who otherwise might not partake in published discourses and (2) for editors who aim for inclusivity but come up against limitations.

To answer Hansen and Watkin's question, we drew on Watkin's insight (on Blind and universal access) and consulted with Blind, Deaf, and intellectually/learning Disabled users/authors and access providers, including Amorena Bartlett (on d/Deaf access), Kelsie Acton, and Daniel Foulds (on intellectual/learning access). Leaning into their suggestions within our budget, we decided to create (1) video-recorded translations in American Sign Language (ASL) of three articles of three to four thousand words each and (2)

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<sup>1</sup> Footnote: In their case, resources for access purposes were Can\$4,500 plus a small graduate assistant stipend. Half of this amount was covered by *Performance Matters* at Simon Fraser University; the other half was raised by the guest editor, Hansen, at the University of Calgary.

voice recordings of three comparable articles. Apart from a length that was feasible to translate or vocalize, the criteria for selecting articles for access recording were to (1) include work on Deaf or Blind practices alongside writing on accessibility for other disabilities and (2) prioritize articles with visual images or video for d/Deaf users and articles with audio content or rich practice detail, enabling b/Blind users' imagining. We elected to create plain language adaptations of all abstracts to provide inspiring and clear content introductions for intellectually/learning disabled users that can stand alone or be used as access points to full articles. All articles were also made available in a text-to-voice enabled pdf form with meaningful image descriptions. Authors were given guidelines for how to write image descriptions, prepare plain language abstract drafts, and generally increase the accessibility of their manuscripts. They were asked to do their best within their capacity, as many authors featured in the issue are access deserving. Natalia Esling provided sighted writing support for the co-editor Watkin, who is Blind. Importantly, we also collaborated with the *Performance Matters* editor, Coleman Nye, to develop instructions for peer reviewers for bias screening, access styles, different kinds of knowledge, and how to offer kind feedback, drawing on Nye's expertise in disability studies.

This approach ensures (1) that authors are met with increased access awareness in the editorial and peer-review processes and (2) that disabled users have full access to selected materials, while the access features of the remaining contents reduce some barriers. The approach does not result in full accessibility; yet it provides a degree of inclusivity that disabled scholars, artists, students, and community members rarely encounter.

In the following, each set of author guidelines are introduced with brief explanations of how they enhance access. Then we turn to the process of creating access materials with steps and reflections. Finally, the access-aware and kind peer-review instructions are described, again with brief explanations of the thinking behind choices.

## Access Guidelines for Authors

### ***Improving Access for Intellectually/Learning Disabled Users While Supporting Neurodivergent Readers and Sign Language Translation***

Increasing access for users with intellectual/learning disability (e.g., Williams syndrome, Down syndrome, traumatic brain injury) and those with working memory challenges (e.g., depression, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) requires adjusting academic norms for how to structure an argument. It is useful to keep each step of an argument clear and easy to navigate through headings or by repeatedly reminding the user of what has been established and what will be shared next. The same holds true for sentences and specialized concepts. Short sentences that can be held in the mind as a unit and explanations of specialized concepts take precedence over rhetorical craft and fluid discourse. These characteristics also help a sign language translator divide the text into small sections for translation and determine the combined signs that approximate uncommon concepts. Reaching toward such access, we asked that authors try to:

- Organize your text with headers and subheaders. They should make it easy to locate contents named in the abstract and follow the steps of your practice, argument, or study.
- Allow for some instances of repeated context and summary as reminders of what has been established and what comes next in your text, also if it is slightly redundant.
- Be consistent using the same key terms throughout, rather than changing them for variation.
- Try to limit the contents of single sentences (for example to 1–2 ideas and/or a couple of factors) unless the sentence is a list. Use lists with bullet points or numbers where appropriate. Break long or complex sentences into several shorter sentences.
- Avoid very long paragraphs. Try to break them into multiple sections instead.
- As you move from broad concepts to concepts that are more specific to your work, then please ensure that all key concepts are defined in descriptions. This is typically done within your body text when first using the concept. Also consider adding a bracket with a descriptor in common words after the first use

of concepts that are secondary in your work. Avoid assuming that your reader/listener is familiar with academic or artistic concepts and methods that are specific to your field. (Hansen 2024)

### ***Author Requests that Provide Access for b/Blind Users and Enable Both Text-to-Voice Software and Voice Recording***

Headlines, clear structure, and shorter sentences are also useful for b/Blind users, who have reduced browsing options to form an overview. More important, however, are descriptions of visual content and information that voice-to-text software or a voice recording person can verbalize. A good image description practice involves representational accuracy, language that is transparent about subjectivity, and decisions about relevance. The following author instructions can be helpful:

- Use footnotes (not endnotes), but use them sparingly.
  - Build longer footnotes into the body text if the contents are important or shorten them if they are contextual.
  - Write “footnote” at the beginning of each note for text-to-voice recognition.
  - Provide a written description of each image or figure, following the guidelines below:
    - Identify what is important for a viewer to receive from the image (e.g., people/figure, location, action, symbols/text).
    - Use common words (plain language) to describe the main elements of the image or figure you have identified.
    - If there are people in the image or figure then try to ask how they would like to be described (e.g., body, gender, race) and describe them simply. We do not necessarily need eye colour or small details. If you cannot find the person or they don’t respond, then write in the first person to make yourself audible/visible (e.g., “I see”; “that appears to me as”).
    - Include any colours, shapes, or movement that are relevant to the image or figure.
    - Include any writing on the image or figure you deem important.
    - Be concise: sticking to one to two sentences is best, if possible.
- (Watkin 2024)

## Creating Accessible Versions of Selected Materials

### **ASL Translation**

#### *The Steps of the ASL Translation Process and Parameters Chosen for Sustainability*

Amorena Bartlett's translation process begins by reading the content to gain a holistic understanding. Then she rereads it with ASL in mind. The third step is to prepare a written sign language translation, adding sign symbols and segmenting the text. At this point, she requests clarification of terms with multiple meanings from the editor. Then the ASL translation is performed and recorded, section by section. In the last step, section recordings are edited into a single video, while integrating images or video content.

Authors, whose contribution was considered for translation, with their consent, were informed that translation depended on keeping their body text around three thousand words. Bartlett was instructed to bookend each ASL recording with the journal, article, and translator information signed at the front and author bios presented at the end. To keep the task realistic, full references were not included and production quality was kept minimal. Higher production quality is resource demanding, requiring specialized equipment and more practice runs and editing phases. By embracing an everyday aesthetic (completing recordings with everyday equipment and without polishing), the ASL translation gained both authenticity and feasibility.

#### *Amorena Bartlett's Reflection on the ASL Translation Experience*

Working on this project was a fulfilling experience. I learned much about the process of creating a medium that is accessible for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community. It was a challenge to ensure I was not translating from a literal perspective but rather from a reader's perspective. It is a heady concoction to read something in English and understand it enough to be able to translate authentically to ASL. Preparing to produce quality translation and recording required ample time to read and understand the articles. The most demanding part of the process was to edit recordings; yet this last stage of the work was also the most satisfying. The more I read and the more I signed, the more connected I felt to what I was translating. It is a highly immersive experience, and I wanted that experience to be shared with those watching the recordings. My biggest takeaway is the importance of time management.

Truly understanding and appreciating the material you are interacting with is important to provide the best accessible experience possible. This requires focusing all your energy and brain power on one article at a time. All three articles were equally important, useful, informative, and relevant. To translate is to be in the moment with the words you are translating. The only way to achieve authenticity is to use time well and organize in advance; then the rest is history. I am honoured to have been a part of this project.

### ***Voice Recording***

#### *The Steps of the Voice Recording Process and Parameters Chosen for Sustainability*

Unlike Bartlett, Graham Percy does not belong to the community he was creating accessible content for. His process also began with reading the material for understanding. In the second step, he inquired about editorial preferences for representation, tone, and voicing symbols—drawing on Watkin’s lived experience and expertise. Percy then created two short samples with different tone and speed options for the editors to select from. Finally, he divided the content into sections, recorded them individually, and edited the results to a holistic MP4 sound file.

As editors, we asked Percy to represent himself and his own reading experience rather than adopt a neutral “normative voice” or use his acting expertise to develop distinct voices for each author in an attempt to represent them. In dialogical pieces, he therefore named author shifts explicitly followed by a subtle change in tone. Disabled people often experience invisibility and erasure—that is, not being listened to or acknowledged. Representation therefore should be approached with care and by “readers” with related experience of disability, if attempted. Percy received the same instructions as Bartlett regarding information to include at the bookends, naming his own role, and using everyday aesthetic/equipment for meaningful but unpolished production.

#### *Graham Percy’s Reflection on the Voice Recording Experience*

I recently purchased my first iPhone and a microphone, which I used to make recordings. I relied on the Voice Recorder App for software and was initially delighted with its easy functionality. However, when combining my short recordings into a larger, seamless whole, an unpleasant echo appeared, along with a thinness to the sound that gave the impression of being underwater.

Converting the files from MP3 to MP4 corrected most of this distortion. My recommendation is to record the initial files on the highest quality setting for MP4 at the outset.

As a longtime stage actor, it is hard to explain the degree to which I find it disorienting and disheartening to hear the sound of my voice. I don't think I am alone in this experience. I have no advice for how to overcome that sensation, other than to note that after a few days of recording, my voice became the clay I was working with. I mostly recorded while sitting in front of my computer. This made my breath shallower, but it also usefully disrupted my habit as a stage performer of projecting my voice or, frankly, shouting. In my daily life, I am a soft-spoken mumblor, introverted and quiet. My problem was how to decouple clarity and articulation from the professional habit of projecting my voice. As I got quieter, I got messier, reverting to my everyday habit of mumbling. Gradually, a third mode of speaking emerged.

Using that mode, the most significant interpretive intervention I made as a reader was the imposition of a midline pause, or cesura, that gave me a chance to reload my breath. This choice allowed me to relay complex ideas without rushing or straining toward the end of the line. Yet receiving and articulating a large idea simultaneously made for a dizzying experience. As an actor, I usually deliver text long committed to memory and written into my body. In contrast, this mode of instantly speaking what I read gave me the distinct feeling of a high-wire act, where I kept falling off the wire. Going sentence by sentence became my most sustainable recording rhythm.

### ***Plain Language Adaptation***

#### *The Steps of the Plain Language Adaptation Process and Parameters Chosen for Sustainability*

Adapting artistic and academic writing to plain language is a specialized skill. With instructions, however, most can reduce the complexity of their abstract and select the most important parts to communicate with common words. The first step of Acton's work was therefore to provide instructions for authors for how to prepare such a plain language draft:

- Use the 3000 most common words in the English language. You can check how common words are at

<https://splasho.com/upgoer6/>. Use your discretion when it comes to terms that have become common more recently.

- Define words that aren't common.
- Write in short paragraphs.
- Use lists like this one when possible.
- Write in short sentences.
- Write a short summary at the start of a piece.
- Sometimes write a short summary halfway through the piece if it is really long.
- Sometimes take out metaphors if they might be confusing. Often metaphors are confusing.
- Try to move through the information in a logical, linear way. This often means telling events in the order they happened.
- Sometimes give more information about references in the writing so you don't have to look anything up to understand what is happening. (Acton 2024)

The second step of Acton's process was to rework the authors' drafts. This involved further reducing topics covered, writing full-sentence explanations of key terms and ideas, and adding illustrative examples drawn from the manuscript (Acton 2023). The result was reviewed by Foulds, who gave feedback from his perspective as an artist and research collaborator with a learning disability. This feedback then informed Acton's final revision.

### *Kelsie Acton's Reflection on the Plain Language Adaptation Experience*

I've been working on plain language in disability culture for several years. As my understanding of the work has developed, I've come to understand that good plain language will be different each time because the audience is different each time.

Like theatre, writing makes meaning in many different ways. Often, the most complicated part of plain language work is finding a way to share the original feeling of the piece. Even in academic work (like the articles in this issue), we often want our readers to feel. Disabled people write in hope for a different world. Plain language needs to hold that hope.

One of the ways I hold hope is in collaboration. I work with people who use plain language, for a variety of reasons. I share my writing with them. Often, I share the original text. And we move back and forth to imagine writing that makes them feel the way the piece wants them to feel. Together we imagine writing that is not scary, not confusing, not exhausting, and does not bring up memories of past failures. Daniel Foulds and I worked on the abstracts in this issue. Together, with the editors of this issue and everyone who worked on access, we are imagining a more accessible version of academic publishing, one that can imagine people with learning disabilities reading (and writing) in academic journals.

## **Kind Peer Review**

### ***Instructions to Peer Reviewers***

The issue editors, Hansen and Watkin, initiated an exchange with the journal editor, Nye, about how peer review could be adapted for access. Reviewers are often overworked academics who rely on their specialized area of expertise to provide critique and feedback within the few hours they can volunteer. This leads many to focus on assessment and apply parameters that derive from their own work rather than taking time to grasp and adopt the ways of knowing and communicating authors present. Articles that range from artistic reflection to empirical scholarship and apply various access styles would, therefore, face a high risk of receiving well-intentioned feedback that unproductively suggests conforming. To change this culture, Nye included in guidelines to peer reviewers Hansen's descriptions of the knowledge and access styles in our issue. This was placed within a "kind peer review" framework devised by Nye. Reviewers were invited to offer affirmative feedback, stretching the work as members of a peer community rather than critiquing it as anonymous sensors (Yoon et al. 2021). In the following, we offer examples from the guidelines.

### ***Diverse Forms***

Contributions to this issue present four kinds of knowledge: (1) artistic reflection, (2) practice-based discovery/exploration, (3) critical/analytical discussion, and (4) empirical insight. Some articles combine several kinds of knowledge. The standards for presenting and qualifying knowledge are different for each type (Hansen 2023). Whereas the guidelines described all four forms, the example below reflects the first form only.

Artistic reflection should be situated in the practice and the people or environments involved. The work should go deeper than claiming that something worked by engaging with the question of how it worked, why it worked (or didn't work), and the challenges involved. Some reference to related practices or discussions are also expected, but sources are often not academic. The writing/imagining/sounding of reflection can take creative forms and tends to be subjective, reflecting the experiences and identities of the authors. (Hansen 2025)

### *Access Styles*

In this section of the guidelines, the difference that access deserving authors bring to their writing and how that translates into style and ways of knowing was briefly named, asking reviewers to "consider what their perspective reflects and whether different perspectives are valid before suggesting to correct or nuance the work" (Nye 2025). Then we explained the empowering language some disabled authors elect to use (capitalized identifiers or repurposed slurs). The difference between language that centres one disability and formulations that aim for cross-disability inclusivity was also introduced (Hansen and Watkin 2025). Finally, the access principles mentioned earlier were summarized, including reduced sentence complexity; repeated (redundant) introductions and summaries; and access choices that enable text-to-voice software, translation, and voice recording.

### *Kindness*

With the common ground established in the guidelines, kindness required less explanation.

We encourage a kind review process, wherein the reviewer responds from a perspective of care and respect for the author, engages with an ethos of community building, and acts with a collegial spirit that is generous and rigorous at the same time. As this journal issue centres the voices of disabled artists and scholars, the expectation is that our journal reviewers will centre an ethics of access and acknowledge differences in knowledges. (Nye 2025)

## **Distributed Efforts and Selective Approach as Recipe for Sustainability**

The parts of our approach to editing for access yield additional insights when considered as a whole. Although facilitated by Hansen, our access process was a distributed effort where every contributor had agency to affect our work with their knowledge and experience. The deep engagement with content and personal authenticity creators of access material brought to the task are strengths of their work. These strengths were enabled by representing themselves as “readers” and completing the work with agency. Using this agency, access providers suggested involving authors in drafting plain language abstracts and image descriptions and provided instructions for how to do so. In turn, access work became embedded in the full community of contributors to our issue. Having the journal editor lean into our choices and offering suggestions was, of course, instrumental for our ability to carry this work through the peer-review process and to the final, published issue.

Editing for access is not easy. Everything from technical problems, through choices that improve inclusion for some at the expense of others, to finding reviewers who are open to kind reviewing presents challenges. Access editing is to work with and care for the trouble that disability inserts in normative publishing systems. This work is carried by community motivation and collective problem solving. When mobilized by such collaboration, access editing is also not difficult.

In summary, selective production of access materials; distribution of access tasks across specialists, authors, and editors; and flexibility for authors’ application of access guidelines enable everyone to scale their access efforts to their resources and capacity. This renders the approach adaptive and sustainable. We hope our writing proves a useful resource for editors and authors who also wish to increase the inclusivity of their work through access.

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# *Mad Conductors:* Pathways of Attention and Dramaturgies of Care

Stephanie Heit and Alexis Riley

*Mad Conductors* is a participatory performance that arises out of a desire to transmute and transform personal experiences of electroshocks and psychiatric memory loss. It is an exploration of electricity, shock, connection, memory (loss), and collective mad ways of being. What happens when energy is transferred? Who or what conducts the ensemble? How can we hold memory as a community? How can we hold the gaps? What resources do mad ancestors and archives offer? In *Mad Conductors*, we investigate and play with these questions through writing, movement, doodling, sound, and other mediums we invent. Our engagements have happened in community settings, universities, nature, and especially with people with lived mad experiences. Together, we work to create supportive spaces to tend to ourselves and each other while we imagine and experiment with new openings, pathways, and futures of care.

Our essay examines our collaboration as an embodied form of dramaturgy. While psychiatric memory loss can be (and often is) deeply painful, we also suggest that these experiences can point us toward new strategies for collectively holding and narrating memory. Accordingly, we structure our performance engagements not only in relation to our subject matter (psychiatric memory loss) but also in relation to the supports we need as mad collaborators to safely and joyfully engage this material. Rather than scripting a set production, we use our skills as artists to build a diverse range of containers, from participatory performances, university workshops, and house visits. While not necessarily conforming to conventional definitions of performance, we consider each engagement to be equally on par with the others; they are all *Mad Conductors* performances. The resulting project

offers a flexible set of environments, actions, and modes of engagement, all while inviting participants into dramaturgical contact with mad forms of knowledge production.

In this essay, we weave photos, questions, and responses from *Mad Conductors* events with individually authored vignettes addressing our personal experiences as both collaborators and friends. Taken together, this divergent compositional structure reflects the nonlinear, fragmentary, and partial qualities of memory loss, conveying alternate qualities of mad experience in both content and form—what we understand as a mad dramaturgical praxis.



Figure 1. Stills from memory neuron film, 2024. Film editing by Alexis Riley.  
(View the film at <https://vimeo.com/1147444730>)

Image description: Stills from a 2024 film of memory neurons overlaid on moving bodies of the *Mad Conductors*' directors as they experiment with synaptic connections in the Turtle Disco garden on Anishinaabe land in Ypsilanti, Michigan.

## How Do You Remember?

### ***Make Lists. Set Alarms Daily. Send an Email to Myself.***

Stephanie: This project is collaboratively conceived and directed by us, two disabled artists coming together from unique backgrounds and experiences. At the heart of our crip collaboration, we prioritize spending time together regularly, deepening our understanding of one another, and valuing friendship as a critical dramaturgical foundation for performance queries, support, and joy. In our process, we've considered how people enter into questions and

relate to potentially traumatic content. Our performance workshops offer multiple possibilities for engagement—such as words, movement, sound, witnessing—as an access feature so participants can tend to their own energy households and bodymindspirit needs in the moment. This access feature is a significant part of our dramaturgical structure in considering audience. Audience here is not a passive collective receptacle but individuals who are welcome and encouraged to choose how they inhabit space and how they interact with *Mad Conductors'* themes. As set-up, we open each workshop with a disability culture protocol invitation. We want to extend this to you as an audiencing/reading procedure as you engage with this essay. Take a moment to notice how the next paragraph lands, what pathways or permissions or reactions it evokes. Pauses and check-ins are another important part of our dramaturgical care practices.

Disability Culture Protocol Invitation: We welcome you to tune into your own being, notice the depth of your breath, feel the temperature of your skin. Is there anything you need to be more comfortable? If needs outside this essay arise, please feel free to take care of them. Perhaps you want to read or listen from beginning to end. Or maybe you want to dip in and out in a nonlinear fashion. We hope to honour and represent the fragmentary nature of our creative process and the divergent twists of our mad beings. And play. Always curiosity and play.

***Say It Out Loud to Myself. Make a Scrapbook. Writing on Limbs and Hands.***



Figure 2. *Mad Conductors* participatory performance at Riverside Arts Center in Ypsilanti, Michigan, as part of a four-day Disability Arts & Culture Gathering, 2024. Photo by Petra Kuppens.

Image description: Performers with colourful scarves explore memory connections while honouring the gaps.

Alexis: We begin with a query: What have you forgotten?

It is an impossible question, but one we find ourselves asking nearly every day. As two mad-identified people, we are all too familiar with memory's contingencies—its inherent slip and slide. Such instabilities come to us through various means: depression, electroshock therapy, psychiatric medication side effects: those repertoires of mad life that produce memory loss or prevent new memories from forming. A quick review of cultural

representations of memory loss does little to capture the nuances of these experiences, preferring to depict such losses in spectacular (and, often, difficult to witness) forms. Take Jack Nicholson’s performance in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*; his character emerges from psychiatric treatment zombie-like, unaware. Or consider *The Notebook*, where increasing memory loss precipitates death. In both of these examples, the loss of memory is framed as a world-ending event; it precipitates loss of self and loss of life. Taken together, such representations rely on a particular dramaturgy—one that distinguishes between the “before time” of whole memory and the “after time” of fragmented memory, that is, memory loss. In response, *Mad Conductors* seeks to offer an alternate grammar for memory loss, one attuned to the particularities of mad life. Indeed, as disability performance scholars such as Petra Kuppers, Jess Watkin, and Lindsey Barr have observed, performances created by disabled people often produce new dramaturgies grounded in lived experience. Inasmuch as change in capacity might be an ending, it can also be an opening, an invitation to inhabit new sustainable and supportive dramaturgical structures. And so, a new question takes shape:

## How Do We Remember?

***Ancestor Worship. Food and Ritual. Archives.***



Figures 3 and 4. A *Mad Conductors* performance at Riverside Arts Center in November 2024. Photo by moira williams.

Image descriptions: In the left-hand image, Stephanie and Alexis are both seated. Alexis holds a microphone and gestures toward Stephanie who is smiling. In the background to the right of them is the projection of a memory

neuron branching and in front of that a chair and a table that holds the projector with electrical cords snaking down. The photo on right offers a bird's-eye view of a group of people lying and crouching in a circle around a piece of butcher paper to respond to the question asked at each performance: How do you remember? Participants hold brightly coloured markers to draw or jot down their memory strategies (or invite someone else to be a scribe). The bold text between the sections of this essay are a selection of the responses. We invite you to think about how you individually and collectively hold memories.

Stephanie: *Mad Conductors* originated from a desire to make a performance piece based on *PSYCH MURDERS*, my book of hybrid memoir poems about my lived experience of shock treatments, psychiatric wards, suicidal ideation, and extreme bipolar states. Alexis was going to be a dramaturg for the piece. As we began working together, text and themes from *PSYCH MURDERS* provided a launch pad for us to float and play in a space that didn't fit into the traditionally defined director/dramaturg roles. It quickly became clear that something else wanted to emerge drawing from both of our experiences, with an interest in collaborative direction and indirection. An integral component to our dramaturgy has been acknowledging and amplifying the juice of the unknown and the unexpected; the mad dramaturgy of the unreliability and thus deep reliability of the creative moment.

My life has been shaped by disability from an early age (I'm now fifty-two), which I've been out about by necessity and as an activist choice. My education was derailed by illness and hospitalizations; it took almost a decade to get my undergraduate degree. I identify as bipolar, a poet, a shock/psych system survivor, a dancer, a mad activist, and a teacher. I'm not economically active in a traditional sense, receiving social security disability. I codirect, with my spouse Petra Kuppers, Turtle Disco, a somatic writing space on Anishinaabe land where I am a white settler in Ypsilanti, Michigan. My training in poetics and contemplative and somatic awareness practices at Naropa University informs my practice, as well as deep immersion for the last decade in disability arts and culture.

When I met my wife, I'd spent the prior five years in and out of psych wards. She asked me if I knew about the psychiatric survivor movement. In my over twenty hospitalizations throughout my life, I'd never heard those words. In that moment, my world changed.

***Repeating Phrases. Google Calendar. Tell It as a Story.***

Alexis: I am a white disabled psychiatric survivor and interdisciplinary artist from Shawnee and Osage land—colonial West Virginia. I have not always gone by these names. Psychiatry first came to me at age seven; a counter to my anxious child mind. Later, in middle school: a childhood bipolar diagnosis, an appellation that gathered additional modifiers and comorbidities before culminating in an autism diagnosis at age thirty-one. For nearly twenty-five years, I have walked with various shades of madness, but it is only in the last five that I have found mad community. As an artist privileged with an academic appointment, I spend most days searching for mad ancestors in the archives of Oregon State Hospital, wading through case files, newspaper articles, and documentary photographs, uncovering mad community in the past. Webinars and peer support groups hosted by Project LETS, Fireweed Collective, and the Institute for the Development of Human Arts (IDHA) have extended this sense of mad community into the present.

Although we had not yet met, Stephanie was a critical contributor of my growing circle of support. I read her writing while isolated during early COVID lockdowns; her words were a soothing balm. Our current collaboration relocates this exchange from words in print to bodymindspirits in motion, opening up new pathways of attention, new dances of care.

**Physical Habit. Using Colour. Draw or Map It out.**



Figures 5 and 6. *Mad Conductors* performance. Left, *Underwater Green Breathes Vulture*, title by Orchid Tierney, watercolor by Beth Currans. Photo by courtesy of Beth Currans. Right, Beth and Orchid. Photo by Petra Koppers.

Image description: The watercolour image on the left pictures a close-up of an orange kayak surrounded by water and green lily pads with a vulture. In the image on the right, Beth and Orchid sit next to each other, masked, playing a rain stick and a guiro as part of an ensemble soundscape for a memory. In this *Mad Conductors* performance, we paired up to share a memory of a pleasurable place and asked our partners: Will you hold my memory? Then the partner wrote down three words to capture the memory and a title.

Stephanie: Brunch as dramaturgical method. We use brunch as a nurturing infrastructure for our *Mad Conductors* practice, chatting over blueberry pancakes, veggie omelettes, killer croissants, seated outside for COVID protection in various nearby restaurants. In that slippery, often productive realm of the liminal—not one thing, not the other, but its own between meal—brunch offers us expansive time, a slowing, an alternative capacity. We slide into that space to talk about everything from how we are personally, to

questions about how to navigate trauma responses and activating material in a workshop, to how we mediate our own responses, to small sharings about communication preferences (both of us often find writing emails stressful), to our first memories of electricity.

The conversation darts and zig-zags in disjointed lines that we each manage to follow. Or interrupt. Mad constellations proliferate the space around us. We are conductors of our own frequencies that get to compare, investigate, and hum together. I return home full and enlivened by being witnessed, witnessing, and some other thing that feels like spinning, the dizziness, but also the act of casting a line, of making something new, and of adding to an existing web.

***Flash Cards. Singing It. Affirmations.***



Figure 7. Left to right: Bhumi Patel, Stephanie Heit, and Raven Malouf-Renning, early exploration of *Mad Conductors* in “Queer Mad Electrics,” part of the Co-Dreaming: Improvisation Toward Liberatory Worlding symposium, 2023. Photo by Petra Koppers.

Image description: The three participants are seen in silhouette with arms reaching to gather currents from the air, water, and each other in electrical play along the Oakland Bay at Township Commons Park.

Stephanie: As new collaborators and friends, we have been engaged in the dance of slowly learning each other's moves and how we each navigate space as artists with shared and unique disciplines and disabilities. Alexis comes from a more theater-informed background while mine is more movement informed. I tend to offer prompts that are intentionally open and abstract, such as this one for a twenty-minute improvisation about electricity: Take charges and currents from the environment and move them through your body. Where do they enter? Where do they exit? How do you direct the energy? These leave room for a lot of play and possibility but can also result in discomfort and frustration at not knowing what is expected and what one is supposed to do.

Alexis facilitated an exercise where we played with sound scores for memories. Each person in the circle offered a gesture combined with a sound that the group then repeated. We continued building slowly with multiple steps until we had a menu of options to use for a more open improvisation. This kind of score creates a vocabulary and the satisfaction of completion yet also runs the risk of being prescriptive. In *Mad Conductors*, we've thought about if we are exploring a question, an answer, or both simultaneously to inform our dramaturgical structures. What kinds of access and experiences do certain approaches offer? What is most effective in which community settings? Is frustration ok?

***Ask Others to Remember. Ask People to Email Me. Take a Picture.***

Alexis: Community is vital; and yet, community is often difficult to find. As my archival research reminds me, people with mental health differences were and are often subject to isolation and confinement, stigma and shame. These conditions make it difficult to find one another, particularly in public spaces. And so, Stephanie and I have taken a different tack. In addition to hosting open workshops for groups, we also make house calls.

Today we are welcomed into the home of a new friend, where we co-create our own mini *Mad Conductors* event. Together, we gather around what hurts—and how we support one another through that hurt. A loose dramaturgical structure informs our exchange, gently flexing as our tolerance for difficult experiences shifts. We compare notes, fill in the gaps of our individual experiences with the memories of our makeshift collective. There are no gasps in our exchange, no expressions of disbelief (however well intentioned).

Only affirmative nods, small statements of “yes,” “of course,” “me too,” a far cry from the spectacular dramaturgies offered across other media. Buoyed by these affirmations, I begin to experience a kind of yielding, a softening of my own mental borders as I attune to the recollections of my interlocutors. I wonder: Instead of thinking about memory as something one person holds, how might we understand memory as something that is held by a collective, in this case, our trio?

The scaffolding of this small performance—the supportive container held by mad kin—that allows me to broach this question.

***Post-it Notes. Mementos. Place Objects (Keys) Where I Will See Them.***



Figure 8. A group of University of Michigan theatre students participating in a *Mad Conductors* workshop in winter 2024. Photo by Stephanie Heit.

Image description: Six people of various races and genders move in a group from right to left, their feet bare, as they channel the energy of neurons forming connections in the brain. Each person assumes a different posture. Some bend their knees and reach forward, others curve their spines and hang their hands over their feet, others still place their hands on their faces, elbows pointed.

Alexis: When I think about my collaboration with Stephanie, I often wonder at the similarities of our experiences, each conversational anecdote a testimony to the political contours of mad life. At the same time, I linger on what we do not share. My relationship with Stephanie is the first time I've had access to an *intergenerational* mad friendship. Difference sparks curiosity, and my attention turns. Rather than focusing on my individual mad memory—gaps and all—I find myself lingering on the possibility of a collective mad memory...

These ideas emerge while workshopping a two-person exercise. One participant offers three words associated with a memory while the other generates a short movement sequence in response, creating a dramaturgical exchange in which the weight of memory is shared. Stephanie chose Crystal Lake, her sacred space. As she allowed me to hold her memories in my movement, she simultaneously allowed me to hold her mad history. In response, I invited her to do the same, to embody the calming rustle of my grandmother maple. As we took turns passing memories between us, I felt a lineage emerge, a performance-based record of intergenerational madness—those aspects of lived experience often absent from official accounts and, at times, from my own bodily memory.

***Movement Patterns. Storytelling. Do Something Weird.***



Figure 9.

Left to right:  
Stephanie Heit,  
Liz Orvis, and  
Alexis Riley,  
masked with  
smiling eyes,  
taken as a selfie  
in Liz's living room  
in Redford,  
Michigan, 2024.

Stephanie: I had an important realization as we were driving to meet community participant Liz Orvis, author of *I Can Do Hard Things! My journey of Thriving with a Serious Mental Illness*. Liz is a mental health advocate who lives with bipolar 1 and has lived experience with ECT (electroshock). In the nearly twelve years since my own shock “treatments,” I haven’t actually spoken in depth with anyone else who has had ECT. Of course, I talked with other people while I was in the psych ward but, even then, that was more about procedure details and not the impact on our lives. After discharge, I didn’t find any opportunities to talk with other shock survivors. On this first meeting, some of the questions we explored and reflected on were

- What has supported you in healing from shock treatment?
- How have you integrated the experience?
- How have you worked with memory loss?
- What do you wish people asked you about your shock experiences?

These questions provided a dramaturgical framework to facilitate conversation and direct the topic away from the often traumatic recollection of the shock experience itself. This structure inherently has a generative aspect with the answer to the last question offering more questions that could be used in future rounds. In a dramaturgy of care, how can we create structures for emergence?

***Count on Fingers. Journal. Computer Tabs.***



Figure 10.

Left to right: Sarah Dean, Beth Currans, Ashwini Bhasi, and Slade Billew during Memory Lanes workshop, Turtle Disco garden, 2023. Photo by Stephanie Heit.

Image description (previous page): Ashwini reaches her arms up in a memory gesture while Sarah witnesses and Beth and Slade improvise a sound score with xylophones and instruments laid out on colourful beach towels, with red camping chairs and a zero gravity chair in a circle.

Stephanie: We are outside in the Turtle Disco garden on a beautiful spring Saturday for a *Mad Conductors* workshop called Memory Lanes. There are red beach chairs, zero gravity chairs, towels for lying on the ground, options to accommodate different comfort needs. Some of us take our shoes off. We start by moving around the yard while listening to Barbara Streisand sing “The Way We Were.” In the course of the two-hour workshop, we play with “scattered pictures,” recalling a pleasurable place and all of its associated sensations. We write words that capture the essence on orange and yellow paper strips. As a group, we experiment enacting the memories using gestures, voices, words, and instruments—a delicious range of sounds possible from egg shaker, steel drum, xylophone, bells. We each act as conductors for our own memory, tweaking the score as we see fit (more bells, quieter at the end). These tweaks, adaptations, and experiments exemplify our dramaturgical approach where bodymindspirits and different ways of being are foregrounded and privileged over any production mechanisms.

My interest in this query was how we might collectively hold memory. As a shock survivor with profound memory loss, I’ve had to rely on loved ones to fill in and recall the blanks. This has often felt like a deficit, with shame or frustration attached, grief for the missing. On this morning, I had a gestalt-like experience of the group’s holding of my memory, making it more luminous. We all entered into a contract to create and embody each other’s memory place; it didn’t feel like a favour or disability service but rather an opportunity to rub against someone else’s experience and feel it as vibration, word, gesture, with forgotten or unrealized parts just part of the fabric.

## ***Sometimes I Don't.***



Figures 11 and 12. *Mad Conductors* performance at the Center for Mad Culture in Chicago, Illinois, as part of the Dunning Asylum exhibition opening, November 2024. Photo by aL mccarthy.

Image description: In the photo on the left, we see the backs of a full audience seated in front of a screen showing the memory neuron film with some participants reaching and extending their arms in multiple directions, a synaptic dance. The photo on the right features four participants who are engaged in sharing memories and witnessing and holding those memories for each other. One person is a wheelchair user, another is seated on a chair, another on the floor, another on a windowsill. They are holding green and yellow flashcards and colourful markers with their attention and gaze toward the person sharing.

Alexis: Our dramaturgical engagements weave networks of memories, each passed and held between the multiple bodymindspirits who join in our performances. These small moments of exchange sustain us in the present; at the same time, I also wonder how these dramaturgies might stretch into the past. The archival documents I study daily are almost exclusively clinical in nature: written by doctors, nurses, and staff; held in university libraries; and preserved for academic purposes. While I cannot speak for the dead, the absence of mad perspectives within these archives attests to the catastrophe of medical incarceration, its world-ending capacity. Despite this, I am always startled by the overwhelming amount of joy I routinely encounter preserved in these documents. Plays, dances, films, photographs, poetry—all of these practices run through historical records of medical incarceration,

preserving memories of mad friendship, connection, and care. Sometimes, if the light hits just right, the archival photographs I've saved begin to resemble a *Mad Conductors* performance.

Years ago, off balance, I felt swallowed whole by madness, isolated and afraid. Today, over brunch, I tell Stephanie about the photographs I found, mad people joining hands to "trip the light fantastic," at a midcentury state hospital social dance. Together, we feel their energy radiate off the page, calling us to embrace the dramaturgical capacities of our mad bodies, to hold one another's memories, to embrace the gaps.

What did mad people do at the end of the world? They danced.

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# *Carbon Movements:* Relational Dramaturgy in Deaf and Hearing Dance Creation

Connor Yuzwenko–Martin, Ainsley Hillyard, and Pil Hansen

## Entering the Unknown

### *Entering . . . in Performance*

You walk into a black box theatre. To your left, a wooden frame filled with coal-black grain covers the stage floor. To your right, wearable belts with adjustable vibration levels are positioned on steeply raised rows of chairs. In between, two rows of chairs are arranged among miniatures of the stage, inviting spectators like you to touch. If you do, a white underlayer is revealed as your interaction leaves traces and clears ground (see figure 1).



Figure 1. *Carbon Movements* performance, Fluid Fest, Calgary 2023.  
Photo by Darin Gregson.

Image description (previous page): Defined by a spotlight, a young child shapes black grain in a miniature frame with their hand. Their light-skin face expresses calm focus. We glimpse their eyes below large glasses and heavy bangs. From deep darkness surrounding them, we see an adult hand stretching to scoop aside grain. The image is greyscale.

The performer enters dressed in a white T-shirt and light grey training pants. He walks in front of you, visually taking in his surroundings. Approaching each miniature, he runs his fingers by a frame or gently rests his hand on grain. Darkness descends on spectators, directing your attention to light on the full-scale frame. The performer locks eyes on a distant wall while slowly stepping onto the interior. Once his body weight shifts onto the coal-black grain, he slows down and attends to the sensory touch of each step, gradually discovering white footprints left behind. When he too becomes immersed in darkness, he kneels and stretches out the palm of his hand to carefully touch the space, which offers light in return.

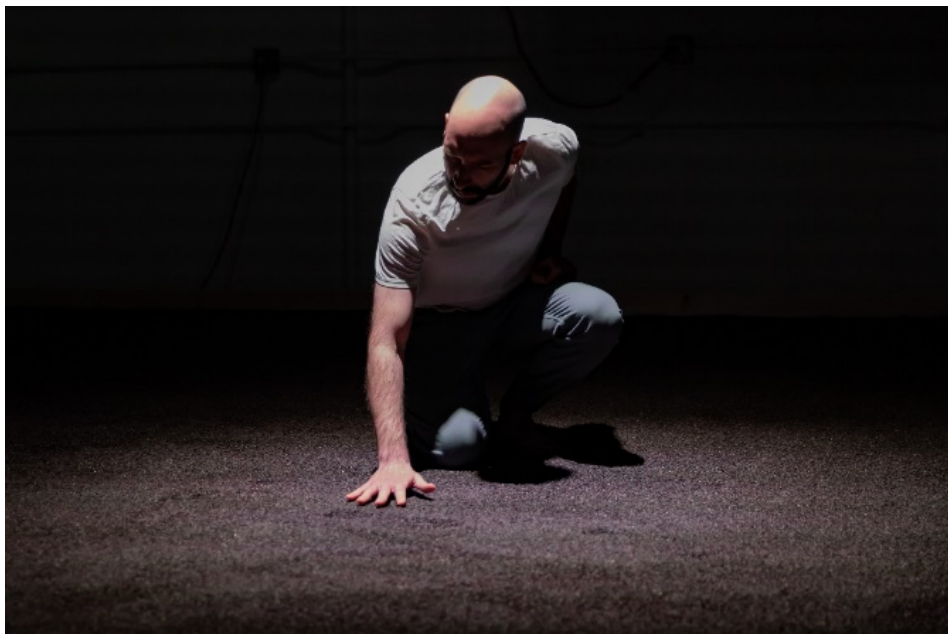


Figure 2. *Carbon Movements* performance, Sound Off, Edmonton, 2023.  
Photo by Armand Bladon (<https://www.armandbladonphoto.com>).

Image description: We see Connor bending down on one knee, reaching out his arm to touch the grain with a flat hand and flexed fingers. The background is in darkness. Connor and the grain below him are bathed in soft brown light. Connor appears as a young white man with neatly trimmed beard and a close-buzzed head.

### ***Entering . . . in Creation***

This moment of touch marks the opening of *Carbon Movements*, an Invisible Practice dance–theatre work, co–created in Canada by the contemporary dance choreographer Ainsley Hillyard (hearing) and the performer Connor Yuzwenko–Martin (Deaf). The work applied vibrotactile technology solutions by David Bobier (hard of hearing) and Jim Ruxton from VibraFusionLab. The process also involved theatre dramaturgical support from Chris Dodd (Deaf), dance dramaturgical input from Pil Hansen (hearing, physically disabled) and Aimee Rushton (hearing), and American Sign Language (ASL) interpretation, primarily by Gail Benin and Andrea Konowalec (hearing). *Carbon Movements* was developed over five two–week periods in 2022 and 2023, through

- dance studio research in Edmonton,
- technological exploration at the VibraFusionLab in Hamilton,
- a dance residency at the Banff Centre for the Arts,
- production and premiere in the SOUND OFF festival of Deaf Theatre in Edmonton, and
- adaptation for tour and presentation in the Fluid Fest, a dance festival in Calgary.

This co–authored article focuses on the Deaf–centric process dramaturgy of Ainsley and Connor’s collaboration. The facilitation of hearing and Deaf dramaturgs receives secondary consideration.

The creation process began with a visual idea. Ainsley’s choreographic work is driven by strikingly kinesthetic (movement–based) images. Associations from these images inhabit her thoughts over time. When Ainsley begins to explore an image through movement, its context and conceptual potential becomes revealed. For *Carbon Movements*, the image was a performer signing through a waterfall of sand–like particles. It was evoked when Ainsley witnessed Connor perform sign poetry during the pandemic. Choreographic ideas emerged after witnessing a VibraFusionLab presentation of vibration technology for d/Deaf users (Bobier, Sawchuk, and Thulin 2021).<sup>1</sup> It inspired

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<sup>1</sup> Footnote: VibraFusionLab adapts wearable technology for the purpose of providing physical vibration experiences that are accessible to D/deaf audiences and artists and can be integrated in artworks. In other contexts, vibration technology is also used to support vibrotactile communication forms, developed with and for D/deaf people who are non–signing.

Ainsley to connect the waterfall with a vibrotactile score: a composition of vibrations, transmitted through engines in the floor or in wearable objects, and sensed through touch. She imagined that this score might affect a performer, the performance space, and spectators alike.

Ainsley brought these ideas to Connor and Chris. Seeking a thematic anchor, the collaborators arrived at the concept of carbon movements. Carbon is the building block of human biology. Craving carbon, we are excavating fossil fuels and burning them to build a human-centric world at a rate that destabilizes the environment we depend on. Resonant interactions between vibrating instruments, environmental particles, and a moving body might reveal something about the environmental naivety and future of humans' carbon desire.

At the outset, Ainsley had little access to Deaf culture or language. Dedicated to reducing this barrier, she spent the pandemic lockdown months learning beginner-level ASL. Similarly, Connor felt underprepared because he lacked experience with dance and vibrotactile technology for the stage. He was, nevertheless, determined to help expand the boundaries of Deaf stage art in Canada through this challenge. In other words, both collaborators stepped into the unknown with determination to learn.

And learn they did, mostly from each other. In the first phase of the process, they shared open and honest conversations about access needs and ways of working. Ainsley received ASL advice and adjustments from Connor when working without an ASL interpreter. Over time, this led her to integrate her, now growing, signing skills fully into their work methods, also when interpreters were assisting.<sup>2</sup> Connor worked through a series of movement tasks devised by Ainsley to explore his physical and mental movement strengths and vulnerabilities. Turning, folding, and rolling repeatedly provided contact between the floor and parts of Connor's body that afforded him proprioceptive (body-experienced) awareness of the space. Gradually, these tasks and the positive feedback received from Ainsley led to more confidence in his ability to express himself through movement. He began to

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<sup>2</sup> Footnote: We also learned that more work is needed to support ASL interpreters as they adapt to less-mediated communication between d/Deaf and hearing collaborators.

own being a physical person, describing himself as a Deaf body that intrinsically understands and appreciates the spatial abilities of the body.

Through these reciprocal learning processes, Connor and Ainsley avoided many of the conflicts between communication forms that repeatedly surface in publications on collaborations between d/Deaf and hearing dance artists (e.g., Stamp 2022, 54; Hodge 2020, 66–68).

When approaching Deaf and hearing collaboration (mixed hearing), it is useful to engage with a broad selection of the communication forms used in d/Deaf language ecologies, including:

- signing and facial expression in a sign language (e.g., ASL);
- writing, reading, and live captioning in a spoken language (e.g., English);
- drawing in sand or other medium;
- lip reading and vocalizing, demonstrating with movement.

Such forms differ across communities and depend on whether a person was born deaf, became deaf later in life, or is hard of hearing (Hodge 2020, 60–62). Deaf with a capital D signals self-identification with Deaf culture and language ecology, whereas deaf with a lowercase d indicates a bicultural identity, positioned between Deaf and hearing culture (Hingson et al. 2024, 3–4).

Conflicts of communication in mixed hearing collaborations are typically caused by audism. Audism refers to hearing-centric ways of knowing, working, and communicating that stereotype, exclude, or disadvantage d/Deaf people (Kochhar-Lindgren 2006, 419). For example, a hearing choreographer may give verbal instructions to a moving d/Deaf dancer, who is turned away from the signed interpretation. A hearing choreographer is likely to demonstrate movement while vocalizing instructions, leaving the d/Deaf dancer to split their attention between the choreographer and the simultaneous ASL interpretation (Hodge 2020, 66–68). Hearing dancers often rely on vocal counting or sounds to memorize and recall movement, leaving out of synch d/Deaf co-dancers who use visual and vibratory markers and cues (Hansen 2022, 41–43).

When d/Deaf dance artists repeatedly have to address audism by self-advocating for access, it is exhausting and can be disabling. Deaf culture provides a much-needed alternative to hearing norms (Kochhar-Lindgren 2006, 419). A deaf-centric dramaturgy extends d/Deaf culture and communication forms through the expressive means of the performing arts, and vice versa. Achieving this requires a creative process that is embedded in d/Deaf communication forms and ways of knowing (for other relevant examples, see Hodge 2020; and Hingson et al. 2024).

As we later return to reflect on the choices that worked for Connor and Ainsley, we are sharing our response to this call for deaf-centric approaches in mixed hearing dance creation.

## **Exploring Space of Expression**

### ***Exploring . . . in Performance***

Kneeling, the performer moves his hands in circles through the coal-black material. He lifts handfuls of grain and watches as gravity pulls it through his fingers. Letting the material rest on his inner arm, he watches and registers the sensation of touch. As he rubs the grain into his skin, seeking more sensation, handfuls scooped up become larger and spill to the side. With fascination and curiosity, he moves in the space, sending out fans of grains. When throwing material into the air, he realizes it falls on him and can be caught. This play erases the path of footprints first created and leaves a pattern of indents and white patches. The performer discovers that a patch can be stretched by sliding through it, especially when taking off at running speed. Landing on the ground, he begins to shape oval patches with his hands and forearms, producing mountains, valleys, and circumferences—first around his body, then distributed in space.



Figure 3. *Carbon Movements* performance, Sound Off, Edmonton, 2023.  
Photo by Nanc Price.

Image description: Viewed from the side and in a wash of white light, Connor is kneeling on the black grain. His attention is locked on a swirling pattern in front of him, featuring cleared ribbons of white floor. His hands are at work, creating the design.

### ***Exploring . . . in Creation***

In the second phase of creating *Carbon Movements*, Connor and Ainsley explored expression through improvised interaction with the grain, its affordances (how it wants to move), and the underlying white floor. Ainsley's choreographic instructions helped Connor understand how different motions and body intentionality can convey intent. He felt attuned (aligned and aware) to the layering of multifaceted meaning involved, in part because sign language requires comparable attention to layering and complex cues. In turn, Ainsley attuned her choreographic attention to Connor's perception and responses when identifying improvised moments to revisit with new tasks. Leaning into the strengths of his embodied memory and this new learning with confidence, Connor started contributing more dramaturgy to the emerging visual and internal narrative.

Connor and Ainsley also began to discover movement sourced in signing and to imbue signing with choreographic layers of expressivity. For example, when developing the section where Connor is creating circular patterns in the grain, his hands were initially fingerspelling *C-A-R-B-O-N*. Ainsley and Connor both felt the spelling was too literal. However, they found the way rice spilled over his hands and obscured the spelling expressive and continued working with this affordance of the grain. A subsequent section, when Connor's creation of circles moves into the larger space, carries more noticeable traces of signing. Here, the creation process started with pedestrian (everyday) movements, interacting with the grain and building compelling circular images. Ainsley tasked Connor to repeat the movements over and over again while watching as signs emerged. The result was developed into sign poetry by bridging between and expanding the signs that appeared: *searching, magic, transform, crush, and destroy*. Connor also drew on these concepts to further clarify and layer the internal, emotional intentions of his actions and reactions. A more legible choreographic sign poem is embedded in a later waterfall sequence. This sequence was sourced in a poem Connor created alongside Ainsley's haunting image. In creation, they started with the poem and let interaction with sand falling over Connor's signing hands adapt the movement.

Considering this range from sign-based movement to choreographic sign poetry, it is relevant to ask what may be gained and lost from merging choreography and signing. As described in Brie Hadley's discussion of universal design for audiences, aesthetically abstracted communication forms and access tools can produce less accessible and comprehensible experiences (Hadley 2022, 186). If, for example, the formal movement of signs is drawn on to create an abstract movement sequence that then is layered with juxtaposing intentionality, then the sign meaning is lost. Inspiration can be drawn from embodied songs and sign poetry to instead embed multisensory communication in choreography (Fisher 2021, 1–3). In these art forms, poetically expanded signs and musical bridges between signs retain strong anchors in the signs' original meaning and context, including emotional expressions (Fisher 2021, 8).

Ainsley and Connor's process of reciprocal learning and attunement between choreographic and d/Deaf language cultures ensured that d/Deaf forms of communication became more fully embedded in the work. As a result, the range of sign abstraction in *Carbon Movements* falls between dance and sign

poetry. The work includes multilayered and emotional forms of communication, which provide more clarity for d/Deaf spectators and accommodates ASL-illiterate spectators, that is, while deliberately keeping the work open for different empathetic, sensory, and interpretive experiences.

## Shaping Landscapes of Agency

### ***Shaping . . . in Performance***

As the performer builds patterns with intentionality, the space reacts with pulsing vibration of air (subwoofer). He responds by organizing more intricate patterns, clearing a large circle of white space as his canvas. In turn, sections of the floor begin to vibrate, softening the edges of his designs. The performer jumps up in surprise, carefully seeking a safe foothold within patches of white that shrink in response. The paths drawn are erased and his feet end up covered in the coal-black grain. Dropping to his knees, he attempts a more forceful approach, clearing swaths of grain firmly with his forearm. When this effort fails, the vibrations come to rest. Simultaneously, miniature frames in the auditorium begin to vibrate one by one, erasing patterns created by spectators within your view. The performer discovers that an air current clearing a patch pauses momentarily when he rests both hands on the revealed floor bed. Using that connection, he expands the patch to contain his body. The clearing is white and pristine, with edges carefully managed by the performer. Back on his feet, he takes it all in and begins to appeal to his surroundings with urgency, poetically signing *want, what, desire, searching, unknown, magic, transform, crush, destroy, un-destroy/reverse destroy, expand, possible, impossible*. He pauses when a waterfall of coal-black grain slowly begins to fall in front of him. With closed eyes, he carefully reaches his arms through the fall, touched by and touching the grain while signing. Obscuring signs, the grain falls through his fingers. It mounts on his feet and covers the clearing.



Figure 4. *Carbon Movements* performance, Sound Off, Edmonton, 2023.  
Photo by Nanc Price.

Image description: In greyscale, we see Connor's profile from the waist up. His hands are signing through falling grain and his head is bent with closed eyes. The image has stark contrasts of white and black. Slim outlines of Connor's arms and face catch light that otherwise seems reserved for the falling grain.

### ***Shaping . . . in Creation***

The focus of the third phase of creation was on enacting and discovering different kinds of relationships with the landscape. The tasks Ainsley first devised invited Connor to respond to the affordances of the space and manipulate them in return. Aiming for more equitably distributed agency, Ainsley wanted to empower the space to collaborate with the performer, perhaps even overtake him. The waterfall was Connor's first experience of the environment as a subjective entity: something that could affect him and require him to surrender control.

Creating a real and impactful feedback relationship was important to reflect thematically on carbon dynamics. Ainsley and Connor shared an understanding of their complicity in settler-colonial excavation and its effect on the climate. Rather than expressing this understanding explicitly, they wished to direct their spectators' attention toward dynamics of complicity and the possibility of co-existence.

A clearer feedback relationship was also needed for the dramaturgy of composition our team worked on at the Banff Centre for the Arts. Pil had that in mind when offering dance dramaturgical suggestions for how to establish readable and iteratively developing action–reaction patterns. Her focus was on interaction that might gradually increase the performer’s and the environment’s awareness of their carbon relationship.<sup>3</sup> Chris’s theatre dramaturgical input focused on Connor’s intentions and emotional reaction to each exchange and discovery. Ainsley and Connor used dramaturgical feedback from these complementary perspectives in support of

- Ainsley’s visual mapping of materials and outlining of potential compositional journeys, and
- Connor’s fine-tuning, adding and adjusting layers of emotional intentionality.

Returning to the previous discussion of ways of working, dramaturgs were invited into the room at specific times, and their input was shared in planned discussion periods. This approach helped reduce competing gestural and vocal noise during the physical work. The hearing dramaturg, Pil, was given additional directions to filter audism. Part of a dramaturg’s role is to observe the way collaborators work and support that process. Another dramaturgical principle of relevance is to provide questions and feedback that support the agency of the artists in the room (Hansen 2018, 185–86). These principles were matched by similar priorities in Ainsley and Connor’s reciprocal learning process and collaborative approach. As a choreographer, Ainsley would lead the process and make confident decisions, after listening to and choosing between ideas, discoveries, and suggestions arrived at collaboratively during rehearsal.

In an earlier creation phase, and supported by VibraFusionLab, Ainsley and Connor had experimented with transducers under the stage floor and subwoofers (Bobier, Sawchuk, and Thulin 2021). Although felt on stage, neither were powered to affect the environment or reach spectators.

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<sup>3</sup> Footnote: For a related example of environmental feedback system as dramaturgy, see Pil’s analysis of Lee Su-Feh’s *Dance Machine* (Hansen 2022, 111–26).

The perceptual dramaturgy of the work created this far invited the viewer's eyes and embodied empathy to mirror Connor's strong attention to touch, proprioception (sense of movement within his body), and visual stimuli (Hansen 2011, 115–18). This reflects d/Deaf reliance on visual perception and motor response (Fisher 2021, 11). By adding more powerful vibrotactile stimulation and pairing it with visually detectable environmental responses, we might transcend the fourth wall. The strongly enhanced capacity of Deaf people to perceive vibration, and significant ability of the hard of hearing, is well established in research measuring neurological responses to vibration (González–Garrido et al. 2017). Vibrotactile impact might therefore expand the enacted carbon dynamic beyond the stage, immersing spectators as complicit humans in the space.

The creative team experienced a breakthrough when VibraFusionLab replaced the transducers with motors capable of producing stronger vibration. When these motors were activated, Connor no longer experienced standing on the stage; instead, he felt immersed in the full-body vibratory response of the environment. He found it scary, exciting, overwhelming, and tantalizing; emotions he now could enhance or subdue performatively (realistically) instead of theatrically (pretending).

With access to vibration impact in the last phase of creation, environmental feedback exploration became more realistic and playful. Ainsley would, for example, turn on and off motors under different floor sections, while Connor chased the vibration physically and registered his emotional response. They made vibrations travel, destabilize the grain, and overtake the performer immersively. This created a relationship between the performer and an environment that had mobility and agency.

Dramaturgical ideas were advanced for how to enhance the transfer of Connor's experience to the audience. VibraFusionLab's wearable vibration belts were already in place for spectators and incorporated into the vibration score of the work. The idea of miniatures with grain and embedded motors for the auditorium was developed to invite vibrotactile interaction and intimacy. When first suggested by Pil, the idea was to build an amplifying and multisensory bridge to Connor's discovery of environmental relationships. The final miniatures took this idea further, using interaction to gently raise questions about complicity.

## Sharing Relational Space

### *Sharing . . . in Performance*

With tender pleasure, the performer places a handful of grain caught from the waterfall on the mount. More resolutely, he walks to a stage corner, drops on his thigh, and uses the length of his legs to push grain toward the centre, again and again, clearing long white ribbons. He only pauses to repeat the action on a miniature frame between spectators. As the work progresses, his speed and forcefulness accelerate. The centre of the stage is now transformed into a mount of grain, defined by the tracks of excavation surrounding it. Slowing down in a wash of red light, the performer places finishing touches with more care and sensory attention. He shuffles on his knees and toes in a circle around the mount while moving large handfuls of grain that leave behind an organic pattern. The floor responds with global vibration, disintegrating the edges of the mount and destabilizing the performer. Dropping to the floor, he tries to hold on to the edges, but fails.



Figure 5. *Carbon Movement* performance, Fluid Fest, Calgary, 2023.  
Photo by Darin Gregson.

Image description: In panorama view, we see six lit up miniatures and body parts of spectators who catch the spotlight as they touch the grain or sit by it. We also see Connor kneeling by a mount in the centre of the full-scale frame, washed in red light.

Instead, he stands and cautiously places a foot in the mount, watching it disappear in the material. Using his arms for balance, he steps fully into the mount, recentres his body weight, and then relaxes. In response, the floor vibrations migrate to the edges of the frame, and then dissipate, leaving performer and environment in shared silence. Slowly, he reaches down to touch, letting one knee integrate. With empathy, he lowers his torso and face too. You witness the performer nesting and softening into the mounds' reaction, allowing it to shape his body.



Figure 6. *Carbon Movement* performance, Sound Off, Edmonton 2023.  
Photo by Nanc Price.

Image description: This close-up, greyscale image features Connor's upper body as he rests in the mount and stretches his hand through the grain with particles attached to his forehead.

The grain fills in and accentuates the negative spaces of his body while a sensuous relationship unfolds. Grain attaches to his face and arms as he stretches into the sensation . . . until he falls to rest, and the light dims. In the dark, you feel miniatures vibrating.

### **Sharing . . . in Conclusion**

In this moment, Connor draws on connection and reciprocal care between internal and external landscapes to let a deeper understanding settle. One where past destabilization can become a lesson for what comes next. Only when revisiting his performance for our essay, Connor realized that echoes of the sign *finish* take shape when his hand settles into the mound.

At this conclusion, we see a parallel between the compositional dramaturgy of *Carbon Movements* and the dramaturgy of collaboration in the process of creating the work. Both depend on distributed agency, reciprocal feedback, and learning to listen with multiple senses. Both require entering a space of not knowing while taking time to explore and learn how to communicate. Once that has been achieved, the work that is created becomes as multilayered as the communication is, resonantly relating d/Deaf and choreographic languages to navigate with increased care.

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# *Through My Lens:* An Act of Telling in Exchange

James Long, Amy Amantea, and Nico Dicecco



Figure 1. FOLDA Festival, Kingston, Ontario, 2022.  
Photo by Jay Middaugh.

Image description: The image is of an audience member sitting in front of the projection of a very large medical image of the interior of Amy's eye.

## Beginnings

During a 2021 online workshop hosted by Vancouver's Theatre Replacement and led by performance maker Tania El-Khoury, Amy first proposed the idea of having people describe her photographs—

photographs that she had never seen—back to her. This simple action immediately resonated through the Zoom-boxed faces gathered during a COVID moment, when any act of human exchange was collectively longed for. We wanted to share. We wanted to make. We wanted to relate.

For context, Amy is an actor, writer, access consultant, and advocate with a lived experience of blindness; specifically, she has a total of 2 percent vision in one eye. She is also a photographer whose practice includes walking the city at dawn or dusk, “the golden hour,” looking for interesting light patterns and capturing them with her camera. This is a skill she developed over the last decade through a mentorship with sighted photographer Rick Hulbert.

The emerging project, *Through My Lens*, aimed to bring this practice and Amy’s associated life experiences into a photography studio/performance space where she could share her work as a photographer with someone who would then describe her images back to her. The hope was to create a tourable piece of contemporary performance out of this action: a performance built collaboratively; a performance whose form came into focus through its making; and a performance that still has the capacity to shift as the core creators negotiate our deepening relationships with both each other and the vast spectrum of individuals Amy welcomes in to engage with her photographs.

This written reflection is comprised of individual writing, scripted and unscripted moments from the performance, and transcribed moments from conversations following the most recent run of the work in 2024. Our considerations focus on three identified exchanges that took place during the development and presentation of the piece: the first one between Amy and audience; the next between Amy and media designer/operator Nico in their attempt to make a digital representation of Amy’s vision; and finally, the ongoing conversation between Amy and director James regarding the ultimate function of the performance and how any attempt at overt disability advocacy—a field in which Amy works—might interfere with the potential for theatrical abstraction in the piece.

## Accessibility and Exchange

*Through My Lens* was created over six weeks of in-studio research that began as an inquiry into modes of access. With respect to the work's development, we hoped to bake visual description into our process from the outset and to creatively address an access need we saw as essential to public performance.

In addition to this pragmatic desire to make work more inherently accessible, the research also asked multiple questions, including: What does it mean for sighted individuals to provide descriptions of photographs to a photographer who took them but cannot see them? Could this action expand inside an accessibility framework to provide access to Amy's photos to non-sighted audience members? How and when does the control of access move amongst the various participants taking part in the work? Now when we reflect on our six-week development period, it is clear that at some point the creative research re-focused from an inquiry into access toward what felt like a more reciprocal and intentional investigation of exchange. Prioritizing exchange, and how it might differ from and occasionally challenge notions of access, allowed for a more complex and dynamic series of collaborative investigations in studio and eventually, contributed to a richer sequence of dramatic actions in performance.

When considering the relationship between access and exchange as we defined them (access being afforded and exchange having a more dynamic back and forth relationship), *reciprocity* was a word that came up almost immediately, as did *power*. Each word carries built-in tensions. Access is designed to be granted or earned, and it can be accepted or denied. Exchange may have more potential for negotiation based on its inherent relationality, including misunderstandings, repetitions, conflicts, and transformations; and for the purposes of performance—even in the post-dramatic realm that the creators hope to inhabit—actions of exchange may simply make for a better structure, character, and, ultimately, show. Through an extended process of studio-based learning, we developed a more nuanced understanding of both access and exchange and eventually established a more reciprocal and collaborative dramaturgy of accessibility *through* exchange.

## Exchange Number 1: The Artist–Audience Contract

As with many performance works, the relationship with the audience starts with some knowledge of the piece and its concept. This information may be delivered via word of mouth, a poster, a social media post, festival program, or another form of advertising, and committed to with the purchase of the ticket. We felt that the title, *Through My Lens*, accompanied with the promotional text describing a blind photographer sharing their work with a sighted participant who describes those photographs back, was a clear and compelling proposal.

At the start of the version of the show for small audiences, and prior to offering any of her photos for description, Amy proposes another transaction for her audience. It is perhaps even an imposition: “I have to take a few photographs of the group this evening. This is a show about photography after all, and I’m hoping that we’re okay with this?” (Amantea and Guest 2024). With this, Amy engages in the first action of *taking*—one that an audience ultimately has little to push back against, short of following her up on the option of covering their faces, which, as far as we recall, none did.

Immediately following comes a more nuanced series of exchanges where Amy initiates the more complicated exercise of choosing which of the gathered audience members will join her on stage as the person responsible for describing her work back to her that evening.

So, what I would love from one of you, in fact, what I need from one of you, is for you to join me up here and describe my photos—because I’ve never really seen them—and to allow me to take some portraits of you while we do this. . . . There’s quite a few of us here tonight, which I’m so grateful for, and this little game will maybe help us choose exactly who will be sitting up here this evening. (Amantea and Guest 2024)

Amy starts her game by asking everyone interested in visually describing photographs to “opt-in” in any way that feels accessible to them, i.e., raising a hand or standing, for example. She then poses a

series of yes (stay in) or no (opt out) questions, such as: Do you notice the little things in life? And, Are you comfortable being vulnerable in public? These questions gradually narrow the group down to a few key candidates, whom Amy begins to engage with individually by asking questions like: What is your favourite season and why? Or, Cat or dog and why? These seemingly benign queries elicit conversation and allow for a better sense of the individuals, one of whom will eventually join Amy on stage.

We added this second round of conversation after a few small-audience shows to allow Amy more time to determine, via two or three minutes of chat, which of the remaining candidates might make for a suitable and engaging scene partner for the next fifty-five or so minutes. Amy's choice of partner was based on peoples' eagerness to speak, the thoughtfulness of their answers, and ultimately, a gut instinct about things a sighted person might use visual cues to determine. It is worth noting that almost all of her choices turned out to be exquisite partners in the piece, some so heartbreakingly honest they could have been intentionally cast.

Once on stage, and prior to any photos being shown, a series of small exchanges continue: Amy first offers her partner a choice of tea and tea cup (a selection of each having been brought from Vancouver); Amy pours the boiling water into a cup with the help (but no explanation) of a beeping liquid leveller; and then Amy poses a series of questions to get to know this guest, including a request for a diversity description specific to gender, race, and ability, for example.

**A:** How about if I were to ask you to describe to me what you look like?

**J:** Oh,

**A:** Yeah, I know. It's a thing, right? Because I'm missing the visual details. And, you know, you already told me that you're a white man.

**J:** Yeah.

**A:** I caught that earlier. And I thank you for that. Because those of us who are blind use a lot of audio description. Audio description has set up white and able bodied as the default. And I often live in a world where people are either othered by

description, or I look over diversity. And I'm made to make assumptions, and I don't like that. So, thank you for offering that. It helps me to position myself in conversation within space. But you didn't tell me about what the rest of you looks like. (Amantea and Guest 2024)

This invitation to speak visible and in some cases invisible identifiers—identifiers that could connect to various dynamics of power, privilege, and access—was originally inserted to offer Amy an opportunity to position herself (politically and socially) in relationship to her stage partner. Looking back on it, the act also opened up a reciprocating state of vulnerability on the part of the guest that, once combined with Amy's eventual inquiries into personal memory, deepened to establish a trust between host and guest. Amy builds on this trust as she moves through a sequence of photos for description: photos of natural and urban environments; a photo of Amy's childhood home that we use to reveal that Amy lost her sight in her early twenties; and a medical photo of the interior of Amy's eye that is displayed over three stages of close-up.



Figure 2. FOLDA Festival, Kingston, Ontario, 2022.  
Photo by Jay Middaugh.

Image description: An image showing an audience member standing in front of a wide screen. The screen shows one of Amy's photos depicting a row of trees and a building behind them. The sun breaks through the tops of the trees. Amy stands to the left of the screen.

Throughout the performance, Amy asks the person on stage to list the objective elements in the frame before inviting them to offer subjective and even imaginary details individual to that person. These details might arise from associative—occasionally vulnerable—memories. They include imagining the smells or sounds that may have been present in the moment the image was captured, and speculations at what may be occurring just out of frame. This act of history building, exclusive and shared, and of finding personally compelling elements in the images continue through a collaborative deconstruction of the photograph: Amy participates from a place of ownership and memory, and the describer does so from a place of offer.

For the blind and low vision audience members, this deep description becomes an access point to the work—an access point that has been integral to the purpose and structure of the work. For Amy, eschewing the objective elements in favour of speculation and potential is the reason she cites for continuing her photography practice. She is not interested in the objects or subjects she captures in her photographs (Long 2023). Her primary pursuit is the curious, impermanent patterns of light that her eye picks up as she wanders. Her secondary pursuit is the associations generated by these random moments she captures in photographs. These connections might be her own—“the feeling of gravel under my feet” or “the memory of her mother being bundled up, because she’s always a bit cold” (Amantea and Guest 2024)—or, once in the performance, those of her conversation partner as they generate personal connections through the images in response to Amy’s questions. The conversations and experiences surrounding the photos are as critical as the photos themselves; they are “conversations you would not get to have with someone on the bus” (Amatea and Long 2024).

This roughly forty-minute familiarity-building exchange of information and histories culminates in Amy asking if the participant would like to see one of the photos Amy took of them earlier in the evening, first in its unedited form, and then treated live with a digital process (what we called a filter) designed to replicate Amy’s experience of sight. This moment is when we hoped the culminating impacts of conversation and trust building would pay off, as participants were asked to

personally engage with Amy’s experience of sight in a public arena. This part of the performance offers a direct encounter with an “other” and their ability.



Figure 3. Triptych of Amy becoming filtered.  
Photo and editing by Nico Dicecco.

Image description: The image is a combination of three images side by side. Each image is a chest-up portrait of writer and performer Amy Amantea. The image on the left is an unedited photograph. The middle image is the same but has a filter that obscures portions of Amy’s face. The image on the right is the same photo again, but even more obscured, allowing only fragments of Amy’s face to be made out.

## Exchange Number 2: Nico, Amy, and the Filter

We use the shorthand “filter” to describe the photo editing effect we developed for use inside the show. The filtering process transforms an unedited portrait photo of our participant into a creative approximation of what Amy sees with the 2 percent vision she has in one eye. *Filter* is, however, a misleading term in this case, potentially conjuring social media images that have been altered using contrast levels and hue gradients in the highlights and shadows, for example. *Filter* implies a preexisting editing tool that can be overlaid on top of an existing photo to instantly create the desired effect. In our case, the “Amy’s Lens Filter” requires Nico—or, as he is referred to in the piece, “our Ghost in the Machine” (Amantea and Guest, 2024)—to actively listen to the conversation happening on stage. Based on each unique performance,

he digitally alters the unedited portrait Amy took earlier to both obscure and highlight essential qualities of her guest. He then displays the image on a monitor on stage—all within fifteen to twenty minutes.

The various elements of this process came out of a set of conversations between Amy and Nico: Amy attempted to describe her experience of vision to Nico, and Nico attempted to create repeatable techniques that would approximate Amy's description as closely as possible. One key detail is that Amy has no central vision. It is not that Amy sees black in this macular region; rather there is a circle wherein she perceives nothing. Of course, it is not only difficult for a sighted person to understand this experience but also not possible to represent visual absence through visual content. Amy described other key aspects of her perceptual experience: High contrast and bold colour are easier to perceive than low contrast and muted colours, and facial details like eyes don't necessarily register, but eyeglasses often do. Amy also related that the "distortion" she experiences isn't exactly the fuzziness or blur a sighted person might expect, but related to the thousands of circular scars that have been surgically lasered into her retina.

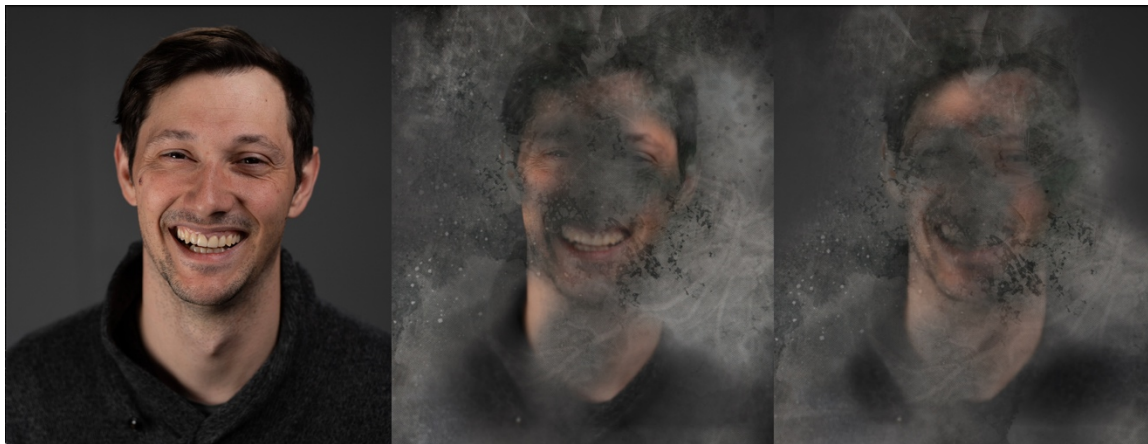


Figure 4. Triptych of Nico becoming filtered.  
Photo and editing by Nico Dicecco.

Image description: The image is a combination of three images side by side. Each image is a chest-up portrait of media designer and operator Nico Dicecco. Nico is white, male, and in his thirties. He has a wide smile. The image on the left is an unedited photograph. The middle image is the same but has a filter that obscures portions of Nico's face. The image on the right is the same photo again, but even more obscured, allowing only fragments of Nico's face to be made out.

With all these elements (and more) in mind, the crucial detail that made the design of a simple filter an impossible goal was the reality that Amy's visual perception of a person is dynamic. While the centre of a static photo is always in the same place relative to its edges, Amy's vision moves to take in the whole person over a period of time. The details that emerge most notably are informed by the dynamics of her engagement with that person. Accordingly, the process that we developed requires Nico to be an engaged witness of the performance, listening for moments that might resonate with details in the portrait that Amy shoots. Even though Amy may not necessarily notice a person's smile when she first takes them in, if that person self-describes as someone who loves to laugh, Nico will likely showcase evidence of their smile in the filtered portrait. Nico tends to remove as much of the content from the centre of the photo as possible in a gesture toward representing Amy's lack of central vision; however, if the person is wearing a bold, high contrast colour and it happens to land centrally in the photo, he will feature that content in a gesture toward representing Amy's dynamic experience of perception. Regardless of the mechanics, or the inability to provide true representation of Amy's experience, the choices Nico makes in the final filtering process, including the scale at which he obscures the subject's face, has led to an ongoing conversation about the messaging and function of the piece.

### **Exchange Number 3: Tell Don't Show?**

"OK, I'm gonna jump on edu-tainment for a moment" (Long in Amatea and Long 2024). "Edu-tainment" is a self-defined form of performance Amy often uses in her work as a disability consultant and advocate. Edu-tainment is a practice where the clarity of message is as important as keeping an audience engaged. It is also something Amy has recognized colouring her work as a storyteller and performer in past projects. For James, however, the concept of educating through art remains distinctly at odds with much of his practice as a contemporary performance maker. In his view, attempts at educating risk pandering and contradict the poetic abstraction critical for offering alternate experiences of the work. For him, attempts to educate rather than to immerse the audience in an experience, even if it means occasional

befuddlement, allow the audience to get too far ahead of what's occurring in front of them. Despite identifying his work as post-dramatic, James sees education as clashing with the traditional and widely accepted theatrical maxim of "show, don't tell."

"Everything I do is tell because I'm so often immersed in the group of people that don't see. So, I tell people everything" (Amantea and Long 2024). At the beginning of the work's development, particularly in its first iterations, Amy and James spent a fair amount of time debating the value of either position for the work. They discussed how traditional concepts of the abstract or didactic may have to shift considering the collaborators and intended audiences.

*Through My Lens* is a show about a visual form (photography) being described for a non-sighted individual. It was originally conceived by Amy as an access-expanding opportunity to allow blind and low vision audiences to experience her work in an inclusive theatrical setting. Telling, not showing, is intrinsic to the piece. The filtering action of *telling* is revealed through a dynamic exchange that renders the performance convention of merely *showing* a lonely, demonstrative enterprise. It is through this collaborative act of filtering through telling that Amy, as well as the audience, comes to know the person she has brought on stage.



Figure 5. Triptych of James becoming filtered.  
Photo and editing by Nico Dicecco.

Image description (previous page): The image is a combination of three images side by side. Each image is a chest-up portrait of writer director James Long who is white and fifty years old. He is smiling and has messy hair. The image on the left is an unedited photograph. The middle image is the same but has a filter that obscures portions of James's face. The image on the right is the same photo again, but even more obscured, allowing only fragments of James's face to be made out.

It is also worth underling that, for Amy, another core value in creating the piece was to portray an empowered, independent, working, and yes, educating person who also happens to be blind. She wants audiences to return to their lives with a new perception of blindness—one that moves beyond stereotypes of people struggling on disability income and living less-than-full lives. *Through My Lens*, as much as it is a piece of relational, participatory performance, also aims to reduce the stigmatization of the disability community. But do dedicated attempts at reducing stigmas make for compelling self-performance?

## Troubling the Self

Performing the self is a complex act, particularity in a work like *Through My Lens* where any character flaw risks being perceived through a lens of ability. So, why not focus on Amy's various capacities, in life and performance, rather than her gaps? Is this need to demonstrate the flaws of humanity just a theatrical trope imposing itself on a contemporary performance practice? This notion of working outside conventional theatrical norms remains an ongoing challenge for James and his equally present desire to create compelling and consequent actions that are widely accessible to audiences. For him, failure—or at minimum, the potential for it—keeps the viewer engaged as the performance continues. If we are going to ask audiences to sit for sixty-five or so minutes, do we not, as Claire Bishop (2012) insists in her many critiques of social practice, have some obligation to leave space for potential conflict rather than simply presenting well-controlled utopias on stage? Throughout the process, this negotiation was complicated. Amy wished to retain control over the sharing of her art and life, staying emotionally available but not overexposed, while James, in his hunt for tension, kept advocating for “stumbles”:

When you [Amy] are running a workshop, that's straightforward. You're performing authority. You know the answers, you know the structure of the day, and you can control the room. What I find most exciting in the show is when you lose control—when the other person starts moving in a direction you didn't expect. Then you have to catch up, and things go off the rails. (Long in Amantea and Long 2024)

In his study of performance and autoethnographies, scholar Craig Gingrich-Philbrook (2005) points to an inherent ontological conflict in self-performance: He notes how a body on stage telling its own story “troubles the conceptual boundary,” which normally exists between the act of writing and embodying personal narratives. This issue is only intensified in *Through My Lens* by the presence of James, collaborating director—one whom disability scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (1997) would classify as a “normate,” with no obvious equity seeking position—pushing Amy toward flaw rather than virtuosity.

*Through My Lens* is Amy's story. It is promoted as hers and told by her as she navigates between improvised and set language. And yet, it exists within a dramaturgical structure and highly visual environment, co-developed by a team of two other core creators and various designers, all of whom are sighted. Should Amy have the final say in how the presented material develops and ultimately concludes? Or should she yield to James's inclination to extract some potentially diminishing “logic of pain” (Tuck and Yang 2014) that highlights a gap in her character and, by association, life? The conversation continued in the making of the work and comes to a demonstratively performative conclusion in the final exchange of the piece.

## The Moment

**Amy:** What do you see?

**G:** It looks like a piece of art. . . It's what I would describe as a faded memory. Like remembering someone who you don't quite remember. Like someone you are losing your memory of.

**Amy:** How does that make you feel?

**G:** It makes me feel like a moment. Yeah, it makes me feel like a moment. Like a tiny slice. (Amantea and Guest 2024)



Figure 6. FOLDA Festival, Kingston, Ontario, 2022.  
Photo by Jay Middaugh.

Image description: The image is of the back of participant Margaret Evans facing a filtered image of themselves on a monitor. Writer and Performer Amy Amantea sits to the left of the monitor.

The show culminates in a final exchange where Amy asks her onstage guest if they would like to see one of the portraits she took of them earlier. She invites them to pull their chair up to the monitor to view an image of themselves Nico has brought up. Amy asks what they see. The response is usually inflected with a bit of bashfulness and giggles at seeing their own image displayed so publicly. Amy asks how the photo makes them feel, and again, the individual is usually embarrassed, picking out flaws or marks of aging. Although, to be fair, there were a few folks genuinely quite happy with what they saw.

Amy then asks if they would like to see what her eye “sees.” She brings up an image that Nico has altered with the filter we discussed earlier, including bespoke adjustments to highlight unique individual features like their glasses and shirt colour, for example. Amy again asks the person what “they see.” With a lighter touch and clearer image of the individual’s face, their response is generally curious and positive. They may say that it looks “like a painting” or “a work of art” or, as above, “a

moment . . . a slice.” When the filter is more obscuring and the face is less visible, participants have been less positive and, on a few occasions, expressed a sadness in response to her query. The expression of sadness in this encounter is an immediate and emotional trigger for Amy who was never interested in offering up a pitiable version of her experience of the world. When hearing this tone, she often corrects any unflattering word choices rather than absorb them and continue on to what, to once again borrow from traditional narrative tropes, is the classically transformative moment in the work.

Following the reveal of the second image, regardless of how the individual responds or if Amy offers any small corrections, Amy asks the participant if they would like to know what it is she “gets” from their portrait. She then goes on to list a series of complex, human, and non-visual qualities that came up over their time together. These range from critical relationships the describer may have brought up, personality quirks, core memories, and so on—a rich portrait she has pieced together over their time together. This mini “reversal” is situated to demonstrate the breadth of perception possible beyond vision. It is a soft-touch action grounded in structure and, in some cases, resulting from what may have been perceived as a personal slight. It might even be a lesson baked into a narrative—a successful bit of edu-tainment.

## Conclusion

This moment and the many that precede it continue to be pleasurable points of dialogue among the collaborators and audience members (sighted and non) with whom we consult after a showing. The technical, emotional, and dramaturgical choices we find ourselves negotiating as we move forward with the piece involve determining that “Goldilocks” spot for the filter—one that offers an abstract beauty but also elicits a bit of misgiving on the part of the participant. A climax perhaps? Or at minimum, a collaborative wondering that both respects Amy’s experience in life *and* creates the space for the revelation of the many modes of perception that sighted individuals may assume lacking in the lives of the blind or low sighted. We seek a learning, maybe even a teachable, moment that relies on the complexity inherent in offering access through exchange.

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# Fragments Are Enough: Re-Stor(y)ing the “Wasteland”

Jill Carter and Jessica Watkin

A wasteland is a place where, we are taught, there is nothing and no one salvageable. . . . Wastelands are named wastelands by the ones responsible for their devastation. Once they have devastated the earth—logged the forest bare, poisoned the water, turned our neighbourhoods into brownfields so that we must grow our vegetables in pots above the ground—once they have consumed all that they believe to be valuable, the rest is discarded.

—Erica Violet Lee, “In Defence of the Wastelands”

## Reclaiming the “Wasteland”

**Jessica Watkin (JW):** An artistic practice resisting “wholeness” offers space for marginalized artists to find process and place that respond to their lived experiences.

When teaching Disability performance theory, I can feel my students’ resistance first and then the ease of their fear to approach Disability as something valuable. Erica Violet Lee writes of wasteland theory as a framework that “[understands] that there is nothing and no one beyond healing” (Lee 2016). As an educator who is Disabled myself, I demonstrate this belief, this truth, with what I hope is in good relationship to wasteland theory: “destabilizing gentleness, carefulness, softness” (Lee 2016). These concepts are not antithetical to strength but are destabilizing actions amid a society that can default to harshness, speed, and toughness.

In her book *Braided Learning: Illuminating Indigenous Presence Through Art and Story*, Lenape–Potawatomi scholar Susan Dion encourages white settler educators, with care, to “turn toward” stories and truths about Indigenous history. She invites them to demonstrate the consequences that erasing these truths have for Indigenous peoples and the stakes involved (Dion 2022, 19).

To not have courage, to not work toward dismantling the shame of our colonial history, perpetuates that shame. By centring care and learning, Dion invokes a kind of listening that “turns toward” the things that we have yet to engage fully.

**Jill Carter (JC):** Despite our refusal of the master narrative, I wonder how many of us still hold a kernel of belief that those of us who have been cast to the margins are those “whose lives do not matter as lives” (Butler 2016, 196)? If our lives do not matter, what value could there be in reading about them, seeing them played out on stage, or being exposed to any teachings we might have to offer? And yet, as Lee insists, even those of us relegated to the ravaged margins “deserve things written for us, and written by us” (Lee 2016).

Like the ravaged and plundered biotas from which little or nothing that is deemed profitable might be extracted, we (the racialized, disabled, aged and/or impecunious) live with the knowledge that our lives are considered “not lives,” not whole lives and, therefore, not “grievable lives” (Butler 2016, 197).

I suggest that such attitudes are rooted in a cognitive aberration, which is specific to the Western, neoliberal mindset, and which ultimately leads to the devaluation of all life. And, as Chickasaw scholar Linda Hogan has argued, this murderous flaw in the Western imaginary finds its genesis in our relationship to the spoken word—to thought carried on air and sounded in the spaces between us (2000, 117–18).

**JW:** In her 2018 book *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice*, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha offers the concept of prefigurative politics. It is an orientation to creation and being in the world that involves demonstrating the changes you may like to witness in the future (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018, 149). Piepzna-Samarasinha’s invitation to “[wake] up and [act] as if the revolution has happened” (149), presences an accessible future *now*. As a Blind woman, I disrupt the visual world with nonvisual interactions, education, and art making as much as possible. They are normal to me.

By making space for learning and creation *that already considers Disability as having worth*, we begin to invoke spaces where we may meet one another, and hear one another, in a sense of deep listening beyond just words and meaning. Lee’s writing about such kinds of spaces and gestures emphasizes the mosaic nature of this work. She reminds us that creating these spaces is

not one size fits all. It takes different methods and approaches that must shift and change in response to the people in the room: “We must piece those worlds together from gathered scraps, slowly building incandescent ceremonies out of nothing but our bodies, our words, and time” (Lee 2016).

## The Language of Restor(y)ation

**JC:** Gathering up despoiled fragments. Re-stor(y)ing devastated biotas. Speaking into being hopeful futures within re-membered life-supporting worlds. This is necessary work, and it is the work of the storyteller.

Indigenous peoples have long understood that a story told is a potent and living entity that profoundly shapes our understanding of self within the creation and our way of doing life (Cajete 2017, 116). The story told in words, song, dance, or ritual action has been the primary mode of instruction for every people since the beginning of the beginning. The spaces where story is told are ceremonial spaces. However, in this untenable present moment, many of these spaces have become corrupted. *Story* has been weaponized. And those who emerge from their encounters with *story* (in rehearsal rooms, lecture halls, or online fora) often emerge with diminished faith in their own agency, their own infinite worth, the grievability of their lives.

Storytelling is a hopeful act. And it is a ceremonial act. And *ceremony*, as I have come to understand it, is a mechanism through which transformation is both marked and wrought. We undergo ceremonies of learning to move from a state of unknowing to knowing. We undergo ceremonies of healing to move from a state of illness to health. We undergo ceremonies of adoption, naming, and clan initiation to move from one stage of life with its responsibilities and privileges to another stage of life with new responsibilities and privileges. Within ceremony, the past, present, and future converge. Through ceremony, living humans understand themselves to be profoundly connected and responsible to the generations of the dead, the generations of the unborn, the living humans of their historical moment, and all beings who occupy the other-than-human world. The thresholds dissolve between flesh and spirit, human and non-human, living and dead. The threshold between performer and witness dissolves. Together we enter a transformational moment of opportunity in which chaos may be re-ordered.

My interest as an artist and an educator lies in curating the pedagogical incubator. The spaces wherein I do my work—lecture halls, rehearsal halls, page and stage—are all spaces of *story*. These are spaces wherein we teach, we learn, and we are transformed for good or ill. What actions, stories, and linguistic shifts might be required of us to reshape the pedagogical incubator into a *ceremonial container* wherein all participants are safe to articulate hard truths and wherein deep listening occurs? What actions, stories, and linguistic shifts are needed to ensure that the pedagogical incubator (in all its manifestations) becomes the space wherein we come to know ourselves, each other, and each life form that surrounds us as beings of infinite worth? Beings, whose participation in the time and spaces we share is essential to our collective well-being? Beings who are powerful change-agents in the crafting of right relations and hopeful futures?

Wherever I am called upon to tell story, my foci lie in upending conventional structures that cast contemporary witnesses as passive vessels to be filled. I am driven by these foci when employing, re-forming, or devising the structures that contain and carry the stories that I will tell and that will be told to me. It is with a sense of urgency, tempered (for good or ill) by my own incorrigible optimism, that I “cast” all participants in the performative event as world builders charged with the delicate task of confronting harsh truths and untenable living conditions. My hope, always, is that we will stay in the room together, sit with the discomfort, and apply ourselves to the hard work of storying hope, of seeking solutions, and of transforming the harsh and untenable into a “usable past”<sup>1</sup> that will empower the generations who come after us.

As an Anishinaabe artist-researcher-educator, I have absorbed the lessons with which my forebears and contemporary mentors have gifted me: The principle of *minobimaatisiwin* (the way of good life) requires me to walk through the world carefully to ensure that every body lives and that their lives

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<sup>1</sup> Footnote: The notion of the “usable past” was introduced by Van Wyck Brooks in 1918. Today, I use this term in the spirit of Afro-futurists such as Ytasha L. Womack, who invites her readers to “hop into a parallel universe with a past that reads like a fantasy or a future that feels like the past” (2013, 2).

are good. My life is bound up in yours; yours, in mine. Each life, each story, constitutes a single bead in the greater tapestry. No one body is the “whole.” Rather, each body is an essential fragment that sustains the “whole.”

**JW:** An artistic practice resisting the drive to “wholeness” offers space for marginalized artists to find process and place that responds to their lived experiences. I am unable to see a “wholeness” anywhere. My blindness literally inhibits me from seeing my full face in the mirror, a full page of writing, or the stage from the audience. But for me, this is not a lack; it is offering something. I offer a fragmented view, which is enough.

*Fragments are enough.* In the context of Disability dramaturgy and my dramaturgical practice, embracing the fragment-like nature of living every day, and many other things including creation of live performance, is an ongoing practice of care. Eli Clare writes of the “mosaic,” fragmented nature of living and thinking Disability (Clare 2017, xv–xvi), and I see this work as constellation building. Layers of identity, oppression, and socio-political implications imprint on our bodyminds.<sup>2</sup>

As a dramaturgical practice, fragmentation does not ask artists to find clarity immediately or to articulate a whole in relation to their work. Rather, it invites artists to move at the pace of the work, at the pace of care, and allow emergences, repetitions, recirculations, and other moments of Disability life to inform how the work is created.

**JC:** Once upon a time in the West, Hogan tells us, the act of uttering the name of a human or nonhuman entity connoted familiarity and respect. The very utterance bound the speaker more tightly into relationship with the one named (Paz, cited in Hogan 2000, 117). Consider the placename “Marathon,” which means a field with fennel. Its character and appearance and function have been disassociated from the name, which has now come to mean a competitive running event, within which a distance of twenty-six miles and 385 yards must be traversed. Consider, too, placenames in Tkaron:to. . . .

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<sup>2</sup> Footnote: Clare also sees bodyminds as mosaics in and off themselves, collections of understandings put alongside one another (2017, xvi).

No longer the place of black alders, Etobicoke is now a western subsection of the Greater Toronto Area. No longer the place where we “leave the canoes and go home” (*Kabechenong*), the Humber is a river named by John Graves Simcoe for a prominent family in England after whom an English estuary had been named. Newcomers to these shores encountered landscapes that had been named for their character and in accordance with the relationships that had been developed between the human and other-than-human entities that occupied these landscapes. To mark their “discoveries” and stake their claims, the colonizing newcomers proceeded to “re-scape” those lands and rename them after the humans they deemed “grievable” (regardless of the character or deeds of those they honoured), just as contemporary North America names its streets, towns, buildings, and green spaces for those from whom something of “worth” has been or may be derived.

If Creation begins with a word reverberating through emptiness, so too the processes of dissolution and fragmentation—the reversal of the process, the uncreation—might be ignited through the stirring of the air between us by the sounding of intention. Through his manipulation of language, Hogan tells us, Western man has severed himself from the creation by separating himself from all that is “other” (2000, 117). From the moment we begin to speak our first words in these languages, we separate ourselves from the “other-than-me” through naming. As our facility with language increases, we render ourselves emotionally capable of neglecting and/or destroying that which is other than us and those beings in which we can perceive no immediate profit to us.

**JW:** Disabled thinker Mia Mingus offers us *access intimacy*, an articulation of the unspoken and invisible intimacy between people in relation to access (Mingus). Nothing needs to be uttered, or intentioned because intentions are inferred based on the lived experiences of those involved.

A friend of mine rolls into a rehearsal hall in her power wheelchair in wintertime and someone immediately wipes off her chair’s wheels without asking, without preparation. It just is a matter of how we interact with one another to anticipate, or to ask, or to try to care for one another.

## A Language of Welcome

**JC:** It seems to me that what you describe here, Jess, is a turn toward the curation of spaces that welcome *every* body and all bodies of knowledge, that privilege an ongoing process over the final product, and that remind us that we are never finished—spaces that invite us into a perpetual exercise of “relearn[ing] the world” (Simpson, qtd. in Maynard et al. 2021, 144–45).

But the curation of such spaces requires a significant investment of hopeful imagination, time, and ongoing institutional support. I hear in your words, Jess, a space that reverberates with the beginnings of a language. A language that, if adopted as the lingua franca of the everyday, could bridge the distances and breach the walls between us. A language that could affect relational repair within all spaces of encounter.

This excites and emboldens me and calls to mind Linda Hogan’s notion of a language of a “different yield.” I understand this as a language of compassion for self and other that manifests inextricable connection with each utterance (however articulated) and a language that requires, of the receiver, effortful, close listening to sustain connection and deepen intimacy (Hogan 2000, 123). What *affect* (e.g., emotional state and impulse to act) might be produced from sounding such a language (in its verbal and non-verbal forms) within spaces of public performance? And what *affect* might this produce within and apart from these spaces?

Writing during the COVID-19 pandemic, anthropologist Xiang Biao introduces the notion of “the nearby” as a conceptual tool to inform the refusal of a contemporary administrative infrastructure “that is turning local communities into units of administrative control and value extraction” (2021, 147). Although he locates his ideas specifically in China, Xiang Biao’s observations are relevant to the social conditions under which we live in the land of the free-wheeling capitalist. Xiang Biao cautions us that postmodern humans have become overly preoccupied with both ourselves (“the very near”) and distant, imagined worlds (to which we acknowledge no responsibility). Consequently, we have lost sight of the “nearby”—the intermedial spaces between the immediately proximate and the distant. We are no longer able to perceive the connectors between ourselves and those “others” beside us (2021, 147).

On August 31, 2024, I had the opportunity to witness *In My Own Little Corner*, produced by Everybody on Stage in Toronto.<sup>3</sup> This piece bridges the distances between witness and storyteller, between independence and dependence, between humans and their nonhuman companions, between teacher and learner, and between life and death. Together, in a shared “little corner,” we occupy the “nearby.” The experiential distances between us are not as vast as we have been taught to imagine. The one who teaches has much to learn. The one who cares for another will eventually require care. The dead still speak, and their utterances, reverberating in the spaces between, still hold sway over our lives and doings.

Playwright and lead storyteller Carly Neis prefaces our experience of immersion into the “nearby” with a poignant introduction to the language that has been (and continues to be) employed to bar her from the spaces of training and of public performance. Her verbal monologue, accompanied by projections and somatic utterance by sign-language performers, emphasizes how she has been rarified as a “wheelchair bound,” “cripple[d],” unfortunate being whose needs are so great and whose experiences are so removed from the “rest of us” that neither she nor her story have been deemed worthy of a public platform. This, despite her years of hard-won professional training. This, despite the powerful stage presence and fine singing voice she has developed. This, despite her charisma, creativity, and the crucial life lessons she has to share. Language—a language that neither holds nor articulates her essential qualities and gifts—has thrust Neis into a distant realm, a “little [wasteland of a] corner,” constructed by the popular imaginary in which she might exist unseen, unheard, ungrievable.

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<sup>3</sup> Footnote: This production took place at Native Earth Performing Arts’ Aki Studio. Since 1982, Native Earth Performing Arts (NEPA) has graced Tkaron:to with groundbreaking productions by Indigenous artists from Turtle Island and beyond. However, it was not until 2012 that NEPA finally found a permanent home—the home within which stories emerging from various marginalized communities have also been amplified. This is an Indigenous space—a space carefully curated to nurture the Indigenous body and to extend a welcome and like care out to all bodies. As an aging performer and as a director who has worked with *aged* performers, I have found very few venues within this city, which accommodate so broad and diverse a spectrum of abilities and needs as does this modest studio—named for earth herself.

**JW:** During the 2020 pandemic and lockdowns, the Disability community lost the mentor and Elder Christine Korcza. Christine presented at the 2018 FOOT festival I organized at the University of Toronto; we have had so many amazing conversations; she came to my tactile rug exhibition *Productive Discomfort* and felt the rug I had hooked to be touched in a fine art gallery. She embodied what it meant to live against, to live with, wasteland. Her work was not dramaturgical in the tangible sense, but her accessibility work lives on in the dramaturgy of Disability life in her absence: she is felt because we love and miss her. Her legacy is a hope that lingers, that maybe we cannot touch but is fragmented, a mosaic on every Disabled artist's body.

Her absence rings loudly in my ears in my own practice, as I advocate for Disabled artists in institutions that do not want to spend money or time including us. They invest (somewhat) in the invitation. But is that invitation extended to the Disabled artist? Sure, but not for the amount of time it would take for them to feel comfortable, safe, and supported.

**JC:** From her "own little corner," surrounded by supportive bodies on stage (including her therapy dog), Carly Neis maps key points in a journey toward mutual understanding and reciprocal care between mentor and mentee. With musical theatre numbers, she articulates suffering, hope, fallibility, forgiveness, and love, which endure through the inchoate noise of crisis into the vast silence that separates the living mourner from the life that is no more.

The inclusive experience she has curated fills the spaces between us with sound, projected text, somatic expression, softness and colour, bottles of water to cool parched throats, fidget toys to gather or release energies, and with cozy couches and hard-backed chairs to comfortably hold witnessing and performing bodies on and offstage.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Footnote: While I witnessed Neis's show from "my own little corner" in the back row of Aki Studio, I felt myself, energetically, in close proximity with the performing bodies on stage and with those who held and supported those bodies. These supporting bodies included human and canine helpers and ASL interpreters. Indeed, that sense of proximity could have been no greater had I located myself down stage right in the rest area for the ASL interpreters, downstage left with the stage manager and Neis's therapy dog, or in the "pit" (i.e., the space between stage and audience) where comfortable seating had been arranged. Populating the pit with

To curate a space such as this—a space that welcomes and communicates concern for the comfort and assurance of dignity for the bodies that share Neis’s space—requires a significant investment of thought, time, and money. This investment is necessary; such spaces reverberate with the beginnings of a new language (verbal and non-verbal) and an explicit invitation to fully commune by listening “otherwise” with the hair follicles, eyes, nerve endings, fingertips, and heart as much as with the ears. This language is laden with promise to shift expectation and assumption, to re-form cognitive frameworks, and to (perhaps) initiate the development of a “new bodily ontology” called for by Marlene Tronicke (2023, 54).

In this historic moment, this work is crucial. The lacuna between self and other is increasing at an alarming rate, while respect and compassion dwindle. The earth burns: species are disappearing; civil discourse has broken down in online forums, in public spaces, and even in the halls of academe; acts of unimaginable brutality are committed daily in private homes, on the streets, and on the “battlefield.” All life on this planet is precarious and vulnerable despite what we have taught ourselves to believe. And despite the language that we employ to separate ourselves from the “other,” we are all interdependent. And none of us are “safe.”

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performing and witnessing bodies was one strategy employed to blur the boundaries between audience and performer. Shared light, shared refreshments, and shared water breaks were also employed to further chip away at the conventional boundaries between the active performer and the passive spectator. Indeed, the embodied response to a shared apprehension of shifts in light, sounds of water, and verbal or ASL cues transformed a simple act of drinking water into a moving meditation in which we all participated. And with each iteration of the “water break,” the incontrovertible truth of our shared dependencies and our common fragility thickened the air around us and filled the spaces between.

## Revealing the Self, Receiving the Other

**JW:** Jill, I am curious about what you think about the shift from creating “safe places” to “safer spaces” in care- and trauma-informed theatre practice. There was a shift away from “safe” because, as I have heard in many meetings and gatherings, “we can never ensure a safe space for everybody.” I have recently reconsidered the relationship between discomfort, danger/violence, and safety to be vulnerable or one’s true self with others.

I actually believe that we should always be “safe” in work situations and artistic spaces. “Safe” in the realistic sense of we are not in physical danger or in the possible way of harm or violence. We are creating safe spaces when we enter into artistic contracts of working with one another because we do not, I hope, intend to harm one another. I think this language is important, especially when we face the real issue of not safe spaces that Disabled folks sometimes face (and other marginalized folks, like emotional and physical harm to people of colour). If we cannot ensure safety of any kind in this work, should we be doing this at all?

**JC:** The assurance that we are safe to reveal ourselves to others who are sharing space with us is not so easily accomplished, I fear. I believe that to initiate an ontological shift that will bring us together into the “nearby,” we require a new language. Not new words. Not politically correct expressions. But a language that grows with us in the womb; a language that inhabits every story we will ever hear; a language that emanates from heart, and blood, and bone; a language that celebrates the life of self and the life of “other”; a language that reaches across the chasm between the “very near” (self) into the realms of imagined distance to draw us together into the “nearby.”

While reinventing the language that has come to divide us is not, I think, a task for the dramaturg (or theatre maker) *alone*; it is part of a collective endeavour toward a cultural shift in which *all* arts workers should take up an active role. After all, it is through the *story* that we learn to shape lips and tongue and to power breath into the language that will make or unmake self and other, that will blast chasms to separate us or bridge the distances between us.

Within the classroom or the rehearsal hall, I have often found it useful to employ Metis curator and scholar David Garneau's concept of "irreconcilable spaces of Aboriginality" (2016, 21–42). In courses, for instance, where we are engaging with the history and ongoing effects of Canada's residential school system, a retreat into such spaces allows us to articulate the truths that have defined our attitudes, actions, and inaction without the risk of dismissal, denial, reprisal, or recrimination from those whose lived experiences and cosmological understandings do not align with our own.

Within a space restricted to Indigenous learners, the walls might vibrate with the soundings of grief, frustration, scorn, rage, prayer, invocation, and harrowing love. Within their own space, non-Indigenous learners might articulate their understanding of and reactions to the truths that they have encountered in tones of defensiveness, frustration, paralysis, guilt, incomprehension, denial and perhaps, too, a harrowing love.

It is important to acknowledge that when I began this practice in rehearsals for *Encounters at the "Edge of the Woods"* (2019), I learned some valuable lessons, which have informed the ways in which I have begun to operationalize "irreconcilable spaces" in both rehearsal halls and classroom settings. In my experience, two spaces (Indigenous/settler) have not satisfactorily addressed or adequately accommodated the specific concerns and positionality of the diverse individuals who have gathered on these lands and in these spaces to "relearn the world" and so learn what will be required from all of us to live together in a good way.

My nascent attempts have taught me that additional spaces often need to be carved out for those project participants who identify as Indigenous peoples from territories beyond Turtle Island (North America). Similarly, spaces for racialized, disabled, and otherwise marginalized peoples also need to be curated to ensure that all participants may foreground and work through their lived experiences and the beliefs, concerns, and queries that have emerged from these experiences. The opportunity to begin the project of creating new knowledge alongside those whose lived experiences align (to some significant degree) with our own should be offered, before all groups come together to share the work that they have done and begin a collaborative process of project-building that respects and addresses the concerns of all participants and that facilitates a process of acknowledgement, redress, and conciliation

(Carter and Wastasecoot 2024, 19–21). As David Garneau reminds us, within the project of conciliation where harms must be acknowledged, addressed, redressed and eventually forgiven, each party has its own work to do (2016, 23). And before the artistic contract can be negotiated, before a generative collaboration can begin, each collaborator must rest comfortably in the knowledge that the others have done their work.

## Led by Listening

**JW:** Disabled people desire to be understood. When we ask, when we refuse, when we hurt, and when we celebrate. As a nonvisual dramaturg, I am led by listening. As I listen to Blind artist Alex Bulmer work through her script for *Perceptual Archaeology: Or How to Travel Blind*, she articulates a feeling I had never known I'd had before. She describes, after losing her vision, travelling to Los Angeles and finding a swimming pool with her cane. She talks us through finding liquid, gently getting into the pool while leaving her cane on the edge, and using the water's sound to find shape and place in the pool:

I heard a lap echo slap beneath the diving board.  
As I swam around . . . and around . . .  
I came to understand . . .  
the pool shape. (Bulmer 2023)

Using sound as a way to world build was so seamlessly a part of my life that I did not even recognize it as a concept that needed articulating. Yet, the feeling in my chest when Alex's words hit my body is palpable. In this moment, Alex is heard. She is understood. This text spoken in the play invokes audience members to reflect on the relationship between their bodyminds and the material world and the ways we might relate.

Later in the process, Alex is on stage, and we are working on scenes for the production opening in one week. I listen for visual cues that are not translated nonvisually. We begin a call and response-type process where I would listen, pause the rehearsal, and ask what was happening visually, and then we would try out solutions back and forth to find a nonvisual translation for action on stage. Alex says a line and makes a funny face that makes the team laugh. Can she also make a funny noise? Great.

A pace emerged, an exchange, a toggle toward inviting in that “nearby,” inviting into understanding through clarity and creativity. In this way, my dramaturgical practice was nonvisual and in good relationship to nonvisual audiences while honouring Alex’s presence.

Language is a meeting place to find one another. When fragments, scraps, barriers, and refusals are regular and the norm, marginalized communities find one another through a shared understanding, through a shared moment or connection, of being with.

I recognize that it is human nature to hold onto understandings of the world around us based on our cultural upbringing, the belief systems of our loved ones, and what we’ve learned through our lived experiences. We build tools that keep us safe and rely on them into adulthood and most importantly into our relationships with others. The deep understanding that not every person we encounter understands the world around us in the same way is essential to begin unpacking how to connect better, how to develop safe spaces, how to learn to listen, to be in good relationship with one another.

Can I ask a question I think I know the answer to and listen for a different answer? And accept that answer as a truth? Can I be curious about that truth for another person? Can I hear what they are saying to me? Am I able to be vulnerable and to invite vulnerability?

Alex Bulmer stands on stage without being able to see the people in the audience who are witnessing her, and yet she continues to share her vulnerability, her most fear-filled moments. Her body, her words, and her invitations to be heard carry audiences sighted or Blind to hear her. And not just to hear, but to listen. Some of us can hear a word or a concept, we can receive meaning from what someone is telling us, but are we able to pull together scraps, inferences, input from words and from bodies, from information offered and invited, from pulses and heartbeats and intangible affectations that help us come to an understanding, that help us process. Listening, then, is learned through experience, through facing the unknown or the different over and over again over time, and ultimately having the courage to be with, listen to, and respect one another.

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# Improvising Fugitive Access: Drafting Mad Care in a Disability Arts and Culture Classroom

Jose Miguel Esteban

## Drafting an Introduction: A Blank Page

I sit here, on the edge of my office chair, teetering on the precipice of a new school term. I am finalizing my syllabus for a course on disability arts and culture. This is a course I have taught multiple times before. And still, the feeling of uncertainty takes hold of me as I review the document on the screen before me. A feeling of failure can't be escaped. My course design fails to reconcile my dance/movement practices nurtured in disability arts community with the expectations placed on me as a university course instructor. My syllabus fails to embody the radically creative possibilities of disability culture within the colonial legacies that structure how we enter the classroom space and the neoliberal expectations of time that demand our productivity. I am failing to design a course and to write a syllabus that is legible to the expected rigour of the university. My course is failing to facilitate a space that can provide the kind of care I want to extend to my future students—the rigour of care my future students need.

My pulse begins to quicken.

I close the document to contain the looming tumult of anxious thoughts that will soon engulf me.

Trying to find something else to focus on, I open a PowerPoint presentation from the last iteration of this course. I click on a slide that comforts me. On this slide is a quote from La Marr Jurelle Bruce's book *How to Go Mad*

*Without Losing Your Mind: Madness and Black Radical Creativity*. It reads, “Radical compassion is a will to care for, a commitment to feel with, a striving to learn from, and an openness to be vulnerable before a precarious other, though they may be drastically dissimilar to yourself” (2021, 10). Bruce offers radical compassion as an ethical imperative to his proposal of a mad methodology. How can we engage such a methodological consideration in understanding my practices of teaching? How can we be open to the vulnerability of my current self, a precarious other to the drastically dissimilar version of a successful self that is disciplined within expectations of academic belonging? How can we care for a simultaneous failure to take on the role of course instructor and failure to embody the performance of a radical crip and mad artist?

Beside this quote sits the image of an art piece. On the slide is a picture of *Holding Space* by Gloria C. Swain, who identifies as a Mad, Black, aging artist. It was featured as part of *HIDDEN*, an exhibition curated by Swain in 2020 at Tangled Art + Disability in Tkaronto.<sup>1</sup> This installation consisted of a white stool in front of a white gallery wall covered in black text. Beside the text hung headphones through which you could listen to the text being read aloud. Underneath the headphones was a television screen playing a video of the ASL interpretation of the text. The text read:

#### HOLDING SPACE

This is a space for the artist who couldn't be here today.

Whether artists who suffer from invisible disabilities are our ancestors, those who have passed from systemic injustice and violence, those who are physically unable to be here because space is inaccessible or those who experience invisible struggles with mental health, this space is for them. They are artists whose work we value. They are families whose presence is important. We cannot be here, entirely, without acknowledging who are unable to be present today.

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<sup>1</sup> Footnote: Colonially known as Toronto, Ontario, Canada, Tkaronto is on Treaty 13 Territory and is the ancestral land and waters cared for and protected by the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishinaabe, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples.

What does it mean to hold space for someone with hidden disabilities? Holding space means no judgment and opening your heart. It means showing empathy and compassion, and that strength and evolution can come from sharing space, ideas and experiences with other like-minded individuals. It means to put aside ableist thinking and offer unconditional love and support to someone having a difficult time. Holding space allows time for healing. It aims to acknowledge and validate what someone is going through. Holding space is about allowing someone to take all the time they need to heal. It's about assuring them they are loved, valued and irreplaceable. (Swain 2020)

In the class, we explore this as an example of the kinds of radical and rigorous practices of care developed within disability arts community. Together, we reflect on how Swain is urging us to question what it means to create art. And in doing so, Swain's piece becomes an embodiment of radical compassion, provoking questions that guide how we relate to space, to time, to our bodies, to ourselves, and to each other. What might it mean for us to hold space for our different mad, cripp, disabled, and nonnormative ways of being? What might such acts of holding space create? How might such creations mark us as trouble to the racial capitalist logics underlying artistic and academic demands for a final product? My students are invited to reflect on how these questions might shape the creative and artistic practices they are engaging with for their final project.

How has Swain's work shaped my teaching practice? Turning to the next slide, an access practice of *sharing in draft* is offered:

- To support my own anxiety/depression access needs, I ask that we engage in a practice of ***sharing in draft***.
- In doing so, I invite us to repeat, revisit, revise, remix, reframe, rethink, and reimagine anything and everything we share. This can be through class conversations, lectures, online discussion boards, assignments, presentations, office hour meetings, personal reflections, etc.
- I ask us to support each other in this process by acknowledging, respecting, and valuing the incompleteness of our offerings.

- Let's have **radical compassion** for each other and for ourselves by recognizing and committing to an understanding that everything we offer into this space is a work-in-process.

Sharing in draft is how I have radical compassion for my own way of processing ideas through fragmented, sometimes incoherent, rambling and messy thoughts. It holds space for the anxiety that prevents me from expressing myself and the depression that follows my perceived failure to express myself in the ways that I had wanted to. This practice is shared to model what it means to ask for what we need to care for ourselves throughout our time together as a class. This practice is asserted to hold space for these needs, and in doing so, the gesture of holding space is no longer just a critical act of recognizing the structures that police our acts of teaching and learning. It becomes a creative movement of pushing the boundaries of our imaginations so that we might reimagine how to be together differently.

These slides invite me to remember a student who was struggling to submit any of their assignments. I had encouraged them to submit whatever they had. I was ready and willing to give them the partial marks necessary to successfully pass the course. I emphasized that it did not have to be a final product; they could submit a draft. And as the final date came for me to submit my own marks, I anxiously awaited any response from them. Within the final hours before my own due date, their e-mail arrived with a document attached. . .

. . .the document was blank.

I marked their assignment as "incomplete."

I try to hold space for myself.

This gesture requires that we work to understand my failure to have radical compassion for this student. Space must be held to critically reflect on the conditions through which one can so easily take up the task of assessment and play the role of course instructor—a task and a role that can so easily reify the neoliberal expectations of academic belonging.

... the document was blank.

The assignment was marked as “incomplete.”

How can we hold space for teacher, for student, and for the webs of relations being etched onto this blank document?

Radical compassion invites us to reflect on this draft of my performance, and to imagine how to repeat, revisit, revise, remix, reframe, rethink, and reimagine a future draft of interpreting the task of teaching and the role of teacher. . .

## **Drafting a Method: Failure and Dramaturgy**

Through this critical-creative article, we can improvise through the gestures of failure that shape my experiences of teaching and learning within university spaces.

I fail to take on the role of university course instructor through neoliberal expectations of “excellence” (hampton 2023, 67), struggling to assign a grade to my students’ work, resisting the act of fixing a letter that marks them through a binary of success/failure. I further fail to disrupt such expectations by claiming my membership to the institutional life of the university (Cagulada and Esteban 2023, 142)—I do my job and give them a grade. This failure is felt through the anxiety that holds me back from engaging with the richness of my students’ work. This failure is embodied through the depressive gestures of stillness that pull me back to bed (Esteban 2023).

I massage the tension in my neck and remember Jack Halberstam’s suggestion of failure as a queer art. His provocations hold us in a tight and warm embrace:

What kinds of reward can failure offer us? Perhaps most obviously, failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behaviour . . . while failure certainly comes accompanied by a host of negative affects, such as disappointment, disillusionment, and despair, it also provides the opportunity to use these negative affects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life. (2011, 3)

I hold on to the creative potential of failure by pursuing its mad registers. Feelings of despair poke holes in an expected performance of teaching—a performance shaped through multicultural expectations of racialized labour that must be done with a smile (Esteban 2023; 2024, 56–57). As a sensation of release soothes my neck, my head begins to float and swirl with the dramaturgical possibilities of this critical–creative act of failure.

My understanding of dramaturgy is shaped through my dance/movement practices of improvisation. Vida L. Middelton calls us into “this space of embodied encounter [where] an improvised dramaturgy of the flesh refutes the separation of the intellect and the body, challenging the privileging of conceptual knowledge over embodied knowledge” (2015, 106). Dramaturgy is a doing that we are always and already engaging in through our embodied acts of inquiry. What knowledge is held within the tension of our muscles? What can be learned from gestures of massaging and through movements of releasing, floating, and swirling? This is also a narrative form of inquiry. Through improvisation, bodies navigate their movements amid the narratives that choreograph how we read meaning onto our gestures. Moreover, through such an embodied act of reading, our interpretation of these seemingly ordinary gestures holds the possibility of writing different choreographic narratives into being (Esteban 2022a, 138; 2022b, 95; 2023; 2024, 51). Such a possibility of difference is made possible when we invite madness to move us. Through the holes poked by despair, we can engage in what Elisabeth Motley suggests as a crip choreographic method of leaking into their openings to tell a different story of my mad movements through failure (2024, 56).

Pursuing these movements with and through madness, Jessica Watkin’s suggestion of *Disability dramaturgy* becomes both “a lens to analyze a play [in my case a choreography] for Disability and access features and the composition of those features,” and “a practise that can be a person stewarding the Disability-centred and care-full practices that develop Disability aesthetic, community, and culture” (2022, 6). In what follows, both aspects of Disability dramaturgy are explored as we work to analyze and embody my access practice of *sharing in draft*.

## A Theoretical Draft: Access and Fugitivity

Let's begin by dramaturgically analyzing my practices of access. Access is how I begin tackling the question of how to extend care within the structures of classroom choreography.

To start each class, my students are invited to participate in a check-in activity. You are invited to reflect on your own responses to these prompts shared with them:

- What is a word that describes how you are entering into the space today?
- What do you need, desire, and/or request to support you in accessing this space today?

I then invite them to bring some madness into the space by once again introducing my own access practice of sharing in draft.

Sharing in draft is a practice inherited from disability arts community and remixed through my own teaching within the university. It is a practice that I use to support my own anxiety and depression needs—an attempt to access care for myself, and to offer care for my students. And still, there is a different choreographic narrative here.

To reflect on this access desire, Tanya Titchkosky invites us to consider that “when it seems to us that the only thing that matters is the fight for access, *as though* this fight is not also constitutive of the meaning of people and places, we risk participating in the current regimes which know disability too well” (2011, 17). Titchkosky urges us to pause and to encounter this desire for access as an occasion to question our very desire to find belonging within university spaces in the first place. What institutional meanings of people and places allow for the constitution of my access request? What academic narratives of disability and madness does such a request for access know too well? How do these stories reveal something about the regimes of teaching and learning that choreograph our taken-for-granted ways of doing teaching and learning within the university classroom?

My attempt to assert a practice of sharing in draft gestures to, and holds the possibility of challenging, a form of knowledge exchange expected of us in the academy. As instructors, we must be experts. Every word uttered must be profound. Something noteworthy. After all, don't we expect our students to take notes during class? What stories of anxiety, of depression, of madness, of disability come from our attempts to access such a relationship of exchange? There are stories of failure, problem, and trouble. These are academic narratives that suggest that through the right accommodations we might overcome failures, fix problems, and get rid of trouble. But as disability studies scholar Rod Michalko suggests, "the trouble of disability persists" (2008, 401). Disability will always be trouble to normalcy.

While asserting the access need of sharing in draft, I am inevitably required to produce a final product that can be quoted in an essay or transformed into the correct response for an exam question. While this access need of sharing in draft might be extended to my students, they are ultimately required to produce a final product that can be assessed by me, the course instructor, and given a final grade to be fixed onto their transcripts. Madness will always be trouble to the university's normative relationships of exchange between student and teacher. Stuck within such inevitable trouble, let us return to Michalko, who further suggests that "our task becomes how best to live with and in it" (2008, 402). How might living with and in trouble allow us to return to sharing in draft as a practice that invites us to relate differently to expectations of finality and fixity? How might trouble provide an opening through which we might escape the impulse to reduce our acts of scholarly creation to academic products?

It is this task that turns me to fugitivity. Within black study, fugitivity is an idea, a theory, a practice—an act.<sup>2</sup> Following Nick J. Sciallo (2019), I work to understand fugitivity "as a state of existence"—a state of existence that is further given life through Saidiya Hartman's invocation of "the afterlife of slavery" (2006, 6). Fugitivity is a state of existence through black flight, an act

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<sup>2</sup> Footnote: I do not capitalize *black* when referring to creative and fugitive traditions of black study following Bruce's provocation to "emphasize an *improper* blackness . . . a blackness that is neither capitalized nor propertized via the protocols of Western grammar" (2021, 6). When referring to people's identities, I follow the lead of the artists and scholars I am referencing to honour each choice to capitalize or not capitalize b/Black.

of escaping the supremacy of whiteness that, following Sylvia Wynter, forces us to make ourselves knowable in relation to Western bourgeois mappings of “Man” (2003, 317). It is a state of existence through a movement away from the structures and systems that police us into such limited modes of human being. Turning to black study further allows us to trace the radical traditions through which madness becomes a source of creative struggle against the white supremacist logics of Enlightenment Reason that shape our understandings of selfhood in relation to a construction of humanness and personhood (Bruce 2021; Pickens 2019)—the individualizing categories that further objectify and contain us within the academic roles of teacher and student (Freire 2005, 73; hooks 1994, 16). Moreover, black study helps us to name the ways in which fugitive struggle is always and already happening through our everyday, mundane, and relational moves within, against, and beyond the ivory walls of the university (Cagulada and Esteban 2023; Harney and Moten 2013, 110).

Fred Moten further provokes us, suggesting that “fugitivity, then, is a desire for and a spirit of escape and transgression of the proper and the proposed. It’s a desire for the outside, for a playing or being outside, an outlaw edge proper to the now always already improper voice or instrument” (2018, 131). How can we desire this transgression? How can we embody this spirit of escape? How can we play and be in this outside space? This is where I invite us to pursue the fugitive possibility of disability’s trouble. If disability is inevitably trouble for the university, perhaps we might pursue the transgressive registers of such trouble. What might it mean to refigure disability as the proper site of teaching and learning to the always and already improper university institution that can only conceive of knowledge through an insatiable thirst for neoliberal capital? What might it mean to flee the structures and systems that impose and require such a binary of proper/improper in the first place?

In his keynote at a colloquium on critical disability discourse and higher education pedagogy hosted by the Institute for the Study of University Pedagogy at the University of Toronto Mississauga, Jay Dolmage (2024) identified an increase in the number of disabled students leaving the university due to the effects of academic ableism. As an audience, we were troubled by the statistics Dolmage shared. We were troubled that such a departure has resulted in many disabled students not completing their university degrees. What if we were to encounter this trouble as a

provocation—through Moten’s provocation of fugitivity? Rather than reifying the university as a space we all desire to be included into, how can we pursue this departure? How can we learn from this departure? How might disability already offer us a different way of embodying a spirit of escape through its inevitable departure from normative imaginaries of the “proper” student and the “proper” teacher? How might disability always and already invite us to play and be in this outside space through a failure to adhere to academic propositions of what education is—a failure that proposes different possibilities of what teaching and learning could be? In suggesting this, it is important to emphasize that we should be doing everything we can to ensure disabled students feel cared for within the university. Access within the classroom matters . . . it is, after all, how many of us in disability studies begin every class. And still, what if we were to question the ways in which access works to reify the ableist, sanist, colonial, and white supremacist narratives that make up the taken-for-granted choreographies structuring our every attempt to provide care for our students?

As I poke a hole in these choreographies, the possibility of access as a fugitive endeavour is released. A practice of fugitive access can then become a response to what J. Logan Smilges has identified as *integrative access*, the move to “prioritiz[e] the realignment of disabled people with existing institutional and economic norms over challenging the society that created them” (2023, 15). We are constantly encountering the task to interpret integrative access through our roles as teachers within the university. We are provided with letters from accommodations services of what students need: more time for tests and assignments, use of computers or other assistive technologies, note taking services, and so forth. Rarely do such accommodation requests force us to trouble our understandings of the classroom space, of assignments, and of teaching and learning more broadly. Most times, they position disability as trouble to the existing choreographies set in place within university teaching and learning. Accommodations must be reasonable; they cannot disrupt our day-to-day. To understand access as a choreographic fugitive endeavour, however, is to imagine other ways of interpreting our movements within the university. And to perform such fugitive gestures is to escape into critical creativity, moving through radical practices of access that seek to create spaces elsewhere and elsewhen.

In figuring fugitive access as a practice, we can be returned to my practice of sharing in draft. This is a mad practice that does not fit within the bureaucracy of university accommodations. It is an unreasonable practice as it defies the capitalist logics of product through which we get assessments, grades, and degrees. It is unreasonable as it troubles expectations of fixity through which we can come to understand success as the achievements on our transcripts and CVs. It is unreasonable in that it requires teachers and students to navigate access through relationship, negotiating individual and collective needs and desires, imagining ways of proceeding that remain unimaginable to the checklists of what is reasonable amid logics of austerity. It is unreasonable because it requires trust in teachers and students—it is a practice that cannot be controlled by the bureaucracy of the university institution.

I turn to the unreasonable movements through which I share in draft. By choreographically encountering my gestures of teaching and learning, we can work to identify the structures that shape my movements within the classroom and to understand the narratives through which they can be made meaningful. I turn to sharing in draft as borne of my improvisational practices as a dance artist and choreographer, inviting us to swirl within the possibility of André Lepecki's suggestion that choreography might become a "technology for inventing movements of freedom" (2013, 22). And by choreographically engaging my pedagogical strategies, we can pursue the ways in which our crip and mad movements work to write different stories of teaching and learning into being.

This is where I turn away from Lepecki's suggestion of choreography as a technology for invention. I turn, instead, to choreography as a space of dramaturgical encounter where we might take up Petra Kupperts's crip somatic offering of "practices where consciousness of embodiment and cultural formation intersect. Embodied labors of attention on the limits of self and world, a phenomenology that incorporates imagination with tentative reaching toward intersubjectivity and otherness" (2022, 29). Choreography is no longer a tool for the mere invention of movement. It is the creative space where we can encounter the movements that are already there. I turn and turn and turn within this radical space of reaching toward the fugitive movements that disability is always and already gesturing toward. We attend to the improvisational movements of navigating mad care within sanist

structures of the university, recognizing such a dizzying gesture as the fugitive act of hole poking that provides me/us access to mad choreographies of escape.

## A Choreographic Draft: A Dramaturgical Narrative

There is fugitive movement in practices of sharing in draft—a dramaturgical attempt to steward my students, and myself, into different stories of crip and mad creative community. . .

Navigating choreographies of knowledge exchange,  
structures of ivory,

*Enlightenment Reason*

moves us through normative expectations

*settler-colonial structures*

of classroom relations.

A statement is made,

*I am the teacher*

stand up,

*read as the “sage on the stage,”*

at the front,

*encountered as the “expert.”*

separated from my students.

An idea is offered. . .

... pause ...

try to breathe

... revise ...

can't catch my breath

inhale

edit,

exhale

another draft,

inhale  
develop,

exhale  
repeat,

inhale  
nonsense,

exhale  
exhausted.

. . . sit back down,  
recognizing my failure to make sense,  
failure to make sense as the “expert,”  
failure to be made sensible as the instructor.

Shoulders rise,  
neck tenses,  
an offering of another draft.

Uncertain,  
abdominal muscles contract,  
core holding on  
to keep myself upright,  
as statement becomes idea,  
lines blur  
as declaration unfurls itself into question,  
roles shift.

We don't get to every slide,  
don't get to answers,  
hands fly in the air,  
words blurted out,  
sentences interrupted,  
thoughts left unfinished,

no answers,  
just questions. . .

. . . we finish class incomplete.

Core collapses  
falling onto a bed beneath me,  
Sleep doesn't come to me,  
all I want to do is sleep.

Body rests in stillness,  
restless in our thoughts.

Motivation,  
a limited resource  
amidst my not knowing  
how to go on. . .

I read their weekly reflection journals:

A student takes up a question,  
a question inspires argument,  
fists clench but are not drawn,  
punches expressed with exasperated sighs,  
tentative hands relax  
gesturing to each other's  
feet tapping in  
reflection,  
different rhythms moving,  
not in unison,  
but sharing in  
the syncopation of  
our collective learning . . .

. . . another question from my fidgeting fingers  
reveals a repetition in reverse.

They are the teacher,  
sitting,  
standing  
lying, moving,  
and I am the student.  
anxious  
excited  
uncertain  
nervous  
curious  
prepared  
hungry  
not ready  
exhausted  
students school me on what it means to navigate care.

We are the teacher.

We repeat this dance.

We are the student.

We repeat this dance,

back and forth,

forth and back,

improvising over

and over

and over

multiple documents,

after class comments,

regrets,

questions,

concerns

sent via

e-mails,

e-mails,

e-mails,

e-mails,

e-mails,

e-mails,

e-mails,

discussed during office hour Zoom calls  
that always go too long,  
not long enough,  
so we meet,  
and we meet,  
repeat,  
repeat,  
blurring the binaries of role,  
defying deadline,  
and we don't get paid for this labour,

We don't get recognized for this act of study.

assignments blend into class  
discussions blend into readings  
blend into presentations blend  
into artistic creations blend into  
check-ins blend into concerns  
blend into fears blend into  
other discussions,  
the rambles,  
the rants,  
the debriefs,  
the spilling of tea. . .

other classes,  
the open letters,  
the artist statements,

the marching,  
rolling,  
sitting,  
lying in protest. . .

other assignments,  
the different assignments  
—no assignments,  
a blank page.

A blank page,  
theorizing  
traveling to other times,  
inhabiting other spaces. . .  
... something else. . .

... somewhere else. . .

... and still, the term comes to an end. A final draft must be submitted,  
and a final grade must be fixed.

... and still, gratitude.

## **Drafting a Conclusion: A Blank Page and Abolitionist Rehearsal**

I often think back to that blank page, reflecting on my failure to provide my student the care they needed. And still, they extend care, teaching me humility through their response back. They responded to being marked as incomplete with, "I couldn't thank you enough."

*Thank you.*

An appreciation for what?

An appreciation for my failure?

An appreciation of their failure?

An appreciation through our failure?

An appreciation that gestures to radical compassion.

An appreciation that recognizes failure but then offers it back to us as a draft.

An appreciation that invites us to keep trying—Vannina Sztainbok was right when she identified that "students school their teachers on what solidarity looks like" (Sztainbok et al. 2023).

This is an appreciation that gestures to the classroom as a rehearsal space, a place to engage in dramaturgical inquiry through the practising of teaching and learning. And as abolitionist scholar Ruth Wilson Gilmore suggests, “practice makes different” (2022, 3). The dramaturgical provocation, then, is to pursue the different ways of knowing and being that are released through this difference. We may be within the classroom, but we are still struggling to move away. It is no longer a mere escape from any place, but rather flight from the social imaginaries that give meaning to our movement within every space.

Yes, we are still within choreographies of the ivory tower.

Yes, we are still repeating its expectations.

And, if we are so moved by the transgression of disability, perhaps it is in such repetition that we might improvise other ways of being.

This improvisational process can be recognized as an abolitionist creative endeavour, what Gilmore suggests as “a fleshly and material presence of social life lived differently” (Petitjean 2018). We are attempting to interpret a different way of being within the classroom. We break from roles, break rules, break conventions of writing and reading, of teaching and learning. We move away from assessments and products. We find ourselves moving toward inquiry and process. And in this movement, we embody a different way of being together through our everyday performances of teaching and learning. This suggests a radical form of access that no longer wants inclusion in the *what is*, instead working to escape into the *what could be*.

Disability is always playing, doing, being outside normative exchanges of knowledge. In recognizing this, let us return to access no longer as a question of how to be included. Instead, access becomes a fugitive provocation to live with, in, and as trouble to normative expectations of university being. The pursuit of fugitive access becomes a dramaturgical invitation to interrogate and pursue the multiplicity of choreographies we navigate through our everyday acts of improvisation. . .

... we move through choreographies of academic regimes. . .

... we repeat their seemingly normative gestures. . .

... we improvise different paths that attempt to escape their expectations. . .

... we interpret the meanings through which we come to understand ourselves. . .

... we choreograph different ways of relating to one other. . .

... consider one last draft on how we might understand such a dramaturgical doing. Cory Nakasue describes dramaturgy as “the connective tissue between the present moment and history, individuals and collectives, and objects and their usage. . . . Like a spider’s web, it’s invisible, adjustable, and integral. Pull on one thread of the web and the landscape shifts, as do the actions that are supported. Dramaturgy is the spinning of this web” (2023, 1). Moving with Nakasue, let us end with the possibility of another beginning, a provocation for another and another and another draft. . .

This work is offered as a score for future improvisations,  
a past choreographic text,  
a present object of dramaturgical inquiry.

Pull on its fugitive threads—  
the words, phrases, and gestures that reach for us,  
to access our unravelling failures,  
to pursue the shifting landscapes of my mad being,  
to spin a different web of our crip becomings.

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# Somatic Care Performances: Turtle Disco and Tendings

Petra Kuppers, with contributions from Jessica Watkin, VK Preston, Nadine Changfoot, Cassandra Hartblay and Becky Gold

## Introduction: Dramaturgical Methods of Care

This essay engages issues of accessibility, community, bodily pain, and writing in the context of group somatic experiences, experiencing sensations in two performance locations, prior to the arrival of the ongoing COVID pandemic. By using this essay form, I hope to offer a dramaturgy of access/care/performance/practice to hold ourselves, nonhuman others, and the world toward new forms of cohabitations.

*Dramaturgy* has multiple meanings in different contexts. I am a German person who studied Theater-Wissenschaft (the science of theatre) in Cologne, amid a cohort of people who wanted to be house dramaturgs. This meant that they wanted to help shape the overall production seasons of a theater (or opera, or dance house), acted as a bridge between house style/management/audience development and a particular director, and oversaw the development of programs as one of their core functions. These programs are often akin to small books that collect historical and comparative material about a production, offering insights about a play or production to the audience. This later function, an audiencing procedure, is today still core to my own understanding of dramaturgical concerns: offering glimpses of the production process to audiences, but in my case as a witnessing of happenings that occur without traditional invited audiences.

In my current US context, *dramaturgy* can emphasize other meanings. A dramaturg is often someone who works closely with a playwright or director, helping to shape events within the production context itself—but who also reflects on the production process, its historical origins, and modes of

exclusion and inclusion that might be reproduced. An example here is Dorrine Kondo, who worked as a dramaturg with Anna Deavere Smith and David Henry Hwang, and who writes about institutional incommensurability and conflict as rich areas of investigation during a play's development in her study *Worldmaking: Race, Performance, and the Work of Creativity* (2018). In dance, an important resource is Katherine Profeta, who gives a deep account of the rehearsal and production practices of her dramaturgical work with Ralph Lemon. She describes how "the political and historical implications of intercorporeal exchange were often felt in *Geography* and *Tree's* rehearsal rooms. Work on a tricky flight of dancing would frequently spawn yet one more involved cast discussion about the dancers' reasons for dancing, the tensions between individual and group, the notion of "freedom," the residues of colonialism, or the connections between dance and spirituality. These topics bubbled up easily from just below the surface of the daily work, because they were so often implicit in the reasons for why one moved this way instead of that (2015, 204–205)

This kind of approach—supporting, questioning, and offering alternative avenues based on historical exclusion, shifting toward new practices—is the meaning of *dramaturgy* that my current dramaturgy consultant (and contributor to this issue), Alexis Riley, activated when I asked her to describe her role in our collaboration to me. She offered a well-known definition of *dramaturgy*: "I ask questions." Indeed, she does—and excellent ones! And many of them, given our interests, centre on accessibility and processes of power within our production. "Holding ourselves accountable" becomes here a core dramaturgical function: examining our processes with openness, love and criticality, in order to ensure that we align our practices with our wider aims.

Both somatically flavoured performances and disability culture productions can fall within a complicated space for dramaturgical concerns, in particular as far as institutional(ized) audiencing is concerned. Disability theorist Doran George (2019) writes about the complexities of "capturing" somatic performances by discussing somatic practitioner and performer Eva Karczag's negotiation of the politics of theatrical spectatorship. George theorizes Karczag's "situation–response composition" and dancerly agency, and the way that her open, improvisatory performances clash with the apparatus of large theatrical spaces and their audience rules of visibility and

legibility. I align deeply with George's focus on a fragmented (rather than integrated or "natural") embodiment of somatics: Somatic attention can be a form of research, as a dramaturgy that queries accountability and cultural fit, that aims for the moments of chafing, of disconnect.

George writes about the pull between the dramaturgical requirements of contemporary art culture and the focus on the elusive, fragmented, inward tensions of somatic investigations:

Even while evading the productivity on which corporate arts culture depends, . . . Karczag's work can't be dismissed as lacking in skill, because of the virtuosity with which she meanders elusively. This is precisely the dilemma in which [choreographer/dancer Wendy] Perron finds herself when she notes that, despite wishing that she were doing the "inward sorts of things" in her own concert that she identifies with Karczag, she laments that it "would never read" in the larger space in which she will work. (2019, 240)

The dramaturgy of care this essay offers rests in opening up these "inward sorts of things" of somatic performances, using disability technologies like interdependence and collaborative making to witness what we feel and do as people who do not fit the mainstream. This essay aims to make experiential that which "would never read."

The first space is Turtle Disco, a small disability-led arts space in Ypsilanti, Michigan, USA. I co-direct Turtle Disco with my wife, Stephanie Heit, a psychiatric system survivor, dancer, and poet, in the refunctioned living room of our home. We curate somatic (that is, embodied/creative) experiments with fellow queer/crip local folx. Much of what we trial run in Turtle Disco becomes the framework for our international Olimpias practices, disability culture performance experiments.

The second location is one of these international sites: performance research days in Toronto, Canada, which was part of an Olimpias Tendings workshop hosted by the University of Toronto in April 2019.

The method of this essay focuses on bringing us closer to the somatic experience in its enworldedness, that is, as something that notices both inside and out, and inside and outside in contact with one another. Somatic

practices can carry a charge toward community, history, and change (something I have explored in detail elsewhere under the umbrella title “eco soma”; Koppers 2022). As various methods of charting experience will show, our somatic journeys are not just inward-focused adventures into the self—something which “would never read.” Instead, employing a dramaturgy of audience procedures focused on creative, somatic artful glimpses offers evidence of fragmentation, contradictions, contact zones of all kinds, both immediate, focusing on the sensation in the here and now, and ruminative, knitting together sensation with memory. These later functions, memory and temporality in dance, are central to Vida Midgelow’s understanding of dramaturgical consciousness in improvisation: “embodied practices that play with memory.” (2015, 106).

Participant writings in multiple modalities—from poetry to field notes to narrative account to creative nonfiction—all offer different perspectives on how to share sensation/imagination in interlocking journeys of access and healing. I use nonacademic or academic-adjacent writing practices as modalities of witness, as charts of landscapes that touch inner to outer world. I am not analyzing the writings but rather weaving them into my writing as “object/arguments,” as whole instantiations of their utterance, not in need of decoding and interpreting. Part of this method is intuitive, itself artful. The method aligns with older practices like weaving and montaging—practices often associated with otherness, be it female art making, Indigenous work, or other nondominant practices in our current shared socio-political world.

With this, my use of somatic modalities in creative practice is close to Detroit activist and writer adrienne maree brown’s understanding of somatics. She calls somatics a methodology for transformation that helps us understand that change does not come simply from thinking differently (2017, 203). She writes in the lineage of Audre Lorde’s famous essay “Uses of the Erotic” (1978), reminding us that the somatic “process involves shifting what we understand, what we can feel, and what we practice, reconnecting us with the incredible data and resilience of the body” (brown 2017, 203). Working in a group of people who investigate inclusion and resilience, including disability culture practices of surviving stress and offering access to one another, provides important insights into how to live well, in academia and beyond, in changing and harsh climates.

The method invites active readers: As you make your way through the sections, see what happens as you play with your own readerly stance, how judgment and curiosity might intertwine as the text allows you alternative modes of access. In this way, somatics can become part of academic writerly/readerly practice, something core to the arguments of a range of practitioner/academics, as Sima Belmar describes:

Most somatic practices are tied to the healing arts and are a complex blend of physical actions, thinking practices, verbal cues, and hands-on work. As a field, they focus on the efficient function of the self via a “somatic mode of attention” (Csordas 1993), an increased awareness of one’s physical and mental habits. The academic classroom is often a site of “from the neck up” processing, where the body fades into the background of all that mental labour. How, then, does the practice of attending to our habitual modes of thinking, reading, writing, and speaking appear in the classroom? (2016, 92)

What is gained when we add a dramaturgy of somatic attentiveness to scholarly pursuits? How does, for instance, history writing, or work in participatory action research, change when one’s feelings and bodily sensations become part of what is being recorded and processed, experienced and performed?

Here is my core argument about this writerly performance witnessing: There is a care experience in this attention to the laminar flows of our imaginations and sensations. Being in the presence of each others’ complexity and translating that complexity in multiple attentions to access creates new richnesses. It allows us to bring our monad, our bounded self, in touch with otherness—a core focus of a dramaturgy of care. This attention opens up sensations like pain, unfolds it as an aesthetic experience, and hence offers momentary, fleeting, but hopefully sustaining relief. This mode of dramaturgical attention, to the care/performance of self and other, can infuse our academic writing modalities—and can open up the genres of academic knowledge production.

## Turtle Disco: Amoeba Dance

I am part of an experiment, trying to find relief. My body is on flame with pain. Every few minutes, I have to make conscious decisions about how to move my knee joint so that I can locomote, turn around, or shift my weight on the ground. My joints are freshly inflamed, less than a month into a significant pain flare, my senses still adjusting to the constant deep and fiery pain.

Today, I am running an Amoeba Dance session, and around me, five other movers have their own experiences, lightly led by my input.

We start by dancing with half-decayed leaves which I fished out of the garden. As a warm-up to our internal dancing, we move externally, everybody with a leaf skeleton in their hand, following the movement impulses of branching, thick and thin supply lines, the falling away of material, decay and renewal.



Figure 1. Turtle Disco participant, Denise Leto. Photograph by Petra Kuppers.

Image description: A Turtle Disco participant, Denise Leto, in her nest, on a purple yoga mat, with a cushy and fluffy turquoise blanket draped over her legs. A small dog (allergy-friendly poodle/shitzu-mix Trudi) is on her torso, and Denise smiles as she turns away from exuberant doggie kisses.

In the main part of the workshop, we all make ourselves nests of blankets and pillows, provided in a big trunk at our home entrance. When everybody has created their small movement/stillness space, we dive in. For each of these sessions, I describe three sound patterns that we will practise, letting each vibrate through our bodymindspirits—through the holistic beings that we are. We meditate and micro-move in response.

The practice leans on Continuum Movement, a somatic modality that I have participated in for over a decade, founded by Emilie Conrad Daoud. Though I am not a healing arts practitioner, and do not call my work by this name, I acknowledge its influence on my creative practice as a performance artist. The sound patterns I use are not necessarily part of the Continuum repertoire and are also informed by other somatic/dancerly modalities like BodyMindCentering. All of these modalities function as resources for creative investigation.

Today's three sound patterns include a "dropped O": open and round your mouth, and then make an explosive O sound, originating from the throat, like a cough. Now imagine that O falling into you, rather than being pushed out. You will find that your throat likely opens a bit more, and the small glottal-stop O can travel. Let it travel. If there is movement emerging, follow it. Follow everything. See what arises.

We each explore this sound for ten minutes, in our own nest, and then we write for ten minutes, exploring what came up in this sound/movement meditation.

We'll do the same pattern with two other sounds: a "cave breath," that is, a hollow long O, whispered inside/outside; and a bone breath, an s/z (called Jacques in Continuum Movement): slithering our tongues from s to z quickly, and feeling these vibrations in our bones.

After this hour of sounding/movement and three writing segments, there's an open space, where all three sounds (and more) combine. The two-hour-long practice ends with a final check-in, some images shared, how it felt to be under, to put one's self into this kind of creative trance.

I often mine my own resulting open writings into poetry form. The exercise is one of my core creative reservoirs, a way to open myself to the influences that pass through my life. Below is an excerpt of such a writing, halfway between the initial free write and the final, much more condensed poem (which was eventually published in *Diver Beneath the Street*, a poetry collection, in 2024). It charts what was going on for me that day: pain and bodily discomfort transposed into danger, tightness, the kind of images that come to me when I try to describe pain.

Three free writes are interwoven, break each other—this is something I did in the final writing time, after the open space movement. It felt useful to mix the three different free writes, to open up the crusts of each experience, as a way to relieve the pressure of the collapsing tunnel, that tight tunnel underwater mentioned in the second free write. Engaging with the form aligned with opening bodily sensations.

Martín Ramírez comes up here: He is someone I wrote about in my book on medical performances, and his artwork often comes to me when I am in pain. He is one of the most famous American outsider artists, a Mexican artist who was locked into California mental health hospitals for most of his adult life. His tunnel images often appear to my mental eye when I meditate.

*Muscle tunnel locomotive round, inmates held at psychiatric institutions, Martín Ramírez sings rip-like architectures of invasion, invagination, holey fantasy scene in the mountain's side.*

Underwater cave. Mask sound. Breath beat. Cave snake beneath earth, stone slick with underwater aquifer teaser testers, held at bay but glide right into the next nest, one hollow beneath swallows of giant gullet, vocal cords tight against neoprene black.

Dinosaur bone sticks out of desert cave wall high up in the dry. Skin bird balances on hot wind. Giant stalagmites bite into swamp sun death dinosaur rattle I salt you here I bless you here I compress you here till you reach up in wide arm arc head of jubilation.

*The train comes round the mountain. My muscles anchor themselves on bio-bones that stamp me a woman, osteoporosis work jumps up jumps up jumps strength into elephant's maw.*

Performance/Care. These writings release me from the single focus, the unavoidability of widespread pain in my body, and redirect my attention. And they also chart the effects of communal dreaming. All around me, in these Amoeba Dance sessions, I hear my co-dreamers sounding and breathing.

Ancient Greek healing practices included lucid dreaming. When I am in our Amoeba Dance, I think of these older forms of providing health care: a darkened room, dreamers tended by healer/doctor/shamans, as Eleni Stecopoulos reminds us in her *Visceral Poetics* (2016). Stecopoulos revisits Western theatre's shamanic ancestor Antonin Artaud and finds correspondences between experimental writing and the modalities and diagnostics of holistic medicine. I am deeply intrigued by these confluences and see Turtle Disco in this heritage: care provided by providing openings into inner and outer caves, allowing issues of personal pain, both bodily and psychic, to flow with wider cultural patterns, from settler colonialism to gender trouble to climate catastrophe. All these topics interweave and relate to each other in the experiences of Turtle Disco practitioners and emerge slant in the writing.

I am not collecting the writings of our local Turtle Disco people. Amoeba Dance is my personal creative motor, and not a place upon which I want to turn an anthropologist's eye. My dancers/friends are assured of privacy, and this is an ongoing practice with no endpoint. But I have other sites where the performance maker and performance ethnologist merge more directly, and where writing can be mined, with permission and loving respect. The scores we work out in Turtle Disco move across into nonlocal art practices.

## The Olimpias: Tendings, Toronto

Stephanie and I are in Toronto, a four-hour train ride away, here to work with a number of theatre studies graduate students at the University of Toronto and other performance studies faculty from around Eastern Canada. Our host is Jessica Watkin, at the time a blind PhD student at the University of Toronto, an interdisciplinary artist herself, and by now a frequent collaborator of the Olimpias.

We run a score that emerges from Turtle Disco's experiments. Here is the text of the invitation that we had sent out:

Stephanie Heit and Petra Kuppers explore Olimpias scores and insights from Tendings, small everyday collaborative practices that combine experiential anatomy, disability culture, eco-specific investigations, somatic exercises, and writing. Let's go to the shore, the street, other edge spaces of urban life and insert ourselves, our differences, our breath. This practice nourishes activist interdependent energies and pools resources for community building and stewardship of self and the environment.

The Olimpias is a disability performance artists' collective that creates collaborative, research-focused environments open to people with physical, emotional, sensory and cognitive differences and their allies. In these environments, we can explore pride and pain, attention and the transformative power of touch.

In two days in April 2019, we meet at four sites. The first is the former Women's Union of the University of Toronto. We have a Contemplative Movement Practice session there, led by Stephanie Heit. She received the form from Naropa University teacher Barbara Dilley, and adapted it, with Barbara's blessing, into a Contemplative Movement and Writing Practice. The practice involves a query (in our case this morning, "What sustains you?"), an opening meditation, personal exploratory movement, and an Open Space, i.e., time for improvisatory being-together or witnessing, interspersed with shorter meditation segments and writing time.

That afternoon, we move to the Philosopher's Walk on the University of Toronto's territory. It's a daylighted river, that is, freshly uncovered after settler colonial architectures pushed it underground. This winding path through the leafy campus is a well-loved walking route, and we use drift methods to explore its meaning for us: the kind of site-specific dreamy drifting, open to influence, that is associated with the Situationist International, an avant-garde collective emerging in the 1950s in Paris (for an introduction, see Lavery 2018; and Koppers 2018).

On the second day, we meet at Toronto's Lake Ontario waterfront. It is raining heavily, so the water reflections come mainly from indoors, inside the Power Plant Gallery, a people-of-colour-led space in a mainly white art world. We use a disability culture method to explore the gallery. We guide each other through the exhibits, audio-describing what we see to a person we lead and whose eyes are shut.

Two of our participants are blind and/or visually impaired, so this exercise leads to exciting and challenging insights into smell, touch, and other sensory inputs other than sight (and audio description is mentioned a few times in the participant writings' below). The gallery smells stale, and guards intervene harshly into what are to them unfamiliar ways of being with the art work.

In each of our four encounters in the city, we also incorporate writing, similar to the Turtle Disco Amoeba Dance. Unusually, all of our participants are academics, and I invite them to share their writing with me for this collage, for process-glimpses into what emerges in our somatic practices.

In the first session, Stephanie's Contemplative Movement and Writing, we opened with the question, "What sustains you?" Our organizer, Jessica Watkin, shared with me part of her response writing. She is blind, and her work often engages ways of building tender and sustainable community—for instance, in a collaboration with then fellow PhD student and disability arts researcher Ashley MacAskill, with whom Jess worked on podcasts about sustainability and care networks. Jess writes:

Fluidity and fluctuation sustain the practice. Observing my ebb and flow and communicating briefly. There is a quality in interactions where I know I am offering what sustains me outward.

Invigorating moments of armour building and feeling at home with and beside others.

Silence. Silence sustains me. Silence punctuated by natural sounds. Those birds. Those fighting and squeaking birds. That piano. That kneading of fresh air and noise and isolation.

Being individual in a room of strangers. Feeling presence and absence at the same time.

Being alone but not being lonely. Being alone with others. Feeling the quality of not needing and not kneading. But also fresh bread and butter. Fresh eye fresh air. Crisp. The first day of real fall. Real sweater weather the need for sweaters.

This isn't a list. These are statements. These are sustainable praxis benefits these are mind-body methods.

Here is a glimpse of the second location of this first day, the Philosopher's Walk, narrated through the memories and sensations of VK Preston, then an assistant professor at the University of Toronto at the Centre for Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies. They are a frequent visitor to this path. VK writes about their own experience with pain, writing toward pain opened up by the experiences of somatic attention, before grounding themselves on the walk.

*Pay attention ...*

Awake, I still feel the gnaw of the teeth I ground yesterday while sleeping. I give their ache galaxies, supernovas, and regard it. The eye time-travels within. Between the nostrils, air eddies, bordering deep-well eye-sockets.

The face's contours become so deep that free-divers must clutch stones to sink into the unseen, the unknown. They fall like birds flight-diving in the substance of water. The trickle of unseen springs eludes me. I've heard the river's trickle before by night, seeping through the grates between the buildings, sounds of long tendrils growing like curled, green fingers, entwining the iron railing. Like fingernails, there is paint chipped and red. I open my

cheek bones like a jewelry box packed with raw diamonds,  
brushing off dust, breathing the air of a park coming alive in  
spring.

### Philosopher's Walk

This pathway sways like a stream, liquid beneath our feet, a slow  
s-curve of fitted stones beneath trees that are not yet blooming  
into leaves and blossoms. Wrought iron snakes open the path. A  
wader wavers in thought, dream, remembering the snakes at the  
gates. Open.

This trickling site wends between institutions and disciplines: the  
Western art-music conservatory, the museum of natural history  
(architectural crystals erupting through its roof and wall), the  
university, high-Anglican on the Oxbridge model, crowding this  
sacred, buried stream masquerading as a pretty path and  
dedicated by the colonials to the philosophers.

This afternoon, colleagues stretch out on grass, photographing  
sky and bare branches, heads rested in rhizomatic roots. The wail  
of sirens unsettles the little agreements of the lolling crowd. It's  
the first day of spring. The wind stirs. My paper lifts like a sail as I  
write, and I remember my observation options are method. I lie  
out on a park bench, lingering between institutions, watching  
musicians and lovers trail past, arm-in-arm.

Some of VK's research work has focused on a different form of ethnographic  
ambling, for instance in the environments of Salem, Massachusetts, tracking  
the de-animation of magic in the offered engagements with witchy traces in  
tourist shop paraphernalia or museum displays. They are a practitioner as  
well as a theorist and historian, and these mixed sensibilities become clear in  
the pages of their process writing, in particular in their attention to the  
historical layered-ness of the path and its river, and their experiences of  
healing practice, the layered-ness of their own body.

On the second day, we are in the Power Plant gallery, by the waterfront, and people lead each other. Here is an account of the experience by Nadine Changfoot, who teaches in political studies at Trent University:

The Power Plant: I felt comfortable and confident being led by Cassandra. I so appreciated the rich detailed descriptions she provided and had I appreciation for the complexity of the art being described. Cassandra's descriptions of the galleries helped me understand the scale of the place. I did feel a bit queasy not being able to see, but I also felt a strong sensorial appreciation of the vastness of the space. The woozy feeling came from the echo and the stale air. I felt I wasn't being oxygenated enough. The description of the large windows that faced the lake somehow helped me connect to outside air and water, something which helped me feel a homing of sorts. I feel comfortable beside, and on, and in water during warmer weather, but also in winter when water becomes cold and freezes. I feel it in my body. I longed to touch the art or feel it and hope that the gallery will provide more access through tactile pieces or vibrating access to the art. . . .

When I was leading Cassandra, I was moved and confronted by the limits of verbal description I could provide. I wanted to know what Cassandra's preferences were in terms of entry into the pieces and affect she was drawn to or compelled by. I found myself offering choice toward the end of our 20 minutes. . . . The intimacy of the guiding and being guided felt warm. It had depth. Arm in arm there was a coziness, snugness, a sense of safety and I daresay friendship and intimacy in those moments that was refreshing with possibility, or at the very least a beautiful memory. I would like to create this experience for others.

Nadine Changfoot works in experimental health/care settings. She is a research stream lead and management team member of the project "Bodies in Translation (BIT): Activist Art, Technology, and Access to Life," (SSHRC Partnership Grant 2017–2024). This project is co-directed by Dr. Carla Rice, Canada Research Chair in care, gender and relationships at the University of Guelph, and Dr. Eliza Chandler of Toronto Metropolitan University in critical disability studies. In Peterborough, Nadine leads storytelling workshops in which short multimedia videos are made by older community members, including artists, healthcare providers, and aging and disability advocates who experience intersections of aging, disability and multiple differences, including gender, race, sexuality, and class.

Bringing these kinds of research foci to our Olimpias engagement proved an exciting encounter, and offered reflections on the space of artful experimentation, access attention, and writing practice.

And here is Cassandra Hartblay, in turn, in her experience with Nadine, using a different form to capture her fieldnotes. Cassandra is a cultural anthropologist at the University of Toronto, and works at the Interdisciplinary Centre for Health and Society. She is well used to fieldnote writing, and to charting her experiences in real time. She works with disabled people in Russia and the Russian-speaking former Soviet Union and creates theatre scripts as part of her performance ethnography practice, so an ear toward capturing nuance and experience directly are central to her practice.

I didn't want to miss anything  
I liked the way of falling into a painting sideways that came from  
hearing Nadine's description as it unfolded and her own eye  
wandered across a canvas  
It created a totally different experience  
I want to know the architecture and the light. I want to know what  
things are made of  
Nadine tells me what size they are  
The ground feels very hard, harder than when my sight is guiding  
me  
I have no idea where the edges of the space might be  
I orient myself by impressions of light  
The rain is gloomy, the gallery feels gloomy too  
When Nadine says "dark" I don't know if she means colour or tone  
We entered both galleries backwards, so we found out who the  
artists were at the end  
I loved the tulips [in Alicia Henry's multimedia collage]. Describing  
them made me love them more  
The weather was getting angrier  
Nadine was concerned about what experience I wanted, but I  
wanted her to choose.  
I wanted to live inside of her whims  
I wanted to experience the artworks in a car she was driving

I wanted to find out what drew her in, where her eyes settled,  
what descriptive vocabulary was comfortable (dimensions), what  
was challenging (words for primates)  
I wanted her to slow down  
But I didn't tell her.  
Why rush? Breathe. I'm not going anywhere  
The immense proliferation of detail in the artworks? ... how will we  
ever do it all justice?  
Sighted, we didn't encounter prejudice  
No one bothered us

At the end of our Tendings performance weekend, we stand in a circle, in  
public space, eyes closed. We lead ourselves into trance, listening to the  
water outside in the harbour, to the patter of rain on the roof.

Then we let movement impulses take over—easy to do after two days of this  
kind of sensory immersion, as we are all warmed up into improvisatory space.  
More unusually, we combine audio description with our eyes-closed  
movement practice: We call out what we are sensing, what goes through our  
mind, creating a kind of continuous murmur that in turn influences the  
movement.

The first witness is again Cassandra Hartblay.

Petra sits  
containers—skin—Stephanie says—  
think about the water inside & out. Touch every part of your  
container  
I find a place in my neck and the back of my head where the back  
of my hands fit, elbows toward the ceiling, akimbo.  
I'm shy about touching other bodies  
I want more time to explore the space.  
I feel joy & delight & settled breath from the others. I feel avo  
toast in my belly.  
holding my eyes closed to explore feels  
dreamy, napping and walking—and  
dangerous—edges are more complex—

door flaps, ropes, permeable plants. I want solids, surfaces, coolness, light sources.

The lettering on the wall is not stenciling, but vinyl appliques, I discover.

I am relieved not to be in the circle first. In the circle is slow, reaching, exploratory movement. joyful, little plants.

I perform my duty as an edge.

But also, I have back up: a solid wall behind me. To my right, Alex is not so lucky, the cavernous hallway opening behind her back.

But she holds firm. Stephanie begins to describe what the movers are doing, quietly to Alex... but we I open my ears to eavesdrop, hungry for language. Soon it is my turn, I take over [describing].

VK is kneeling, then Jess is crawling & touching our ankles VK is standing and with Becky back to back & front to front and so much touching, proximity. Giggles. so much—everyone is moving at once, it's hard to know which movements to describe. I default to those that explain sounds.

I say "It's a lot of touch. You can hear Becky giggling."

Alex says, smiling, "I can hear Becky giggling."

The second witness is Becky Gold, who writes in poetry lines about her sensations of being in the circle. Her PhD research at York University at the time focused on promoting self-advocacy and creating critical activist art with neurodiverse artists based on their own lived experiences. Her work also engages with explorations of care and interdependence between people with and without disabilities. She speaks directly to the medicinal, the healing aspects of our Tendings practice:

In this space

I am held by strong backs

Nuzzling necks

Warm hands

In this space I am sustained by whispering voices announcing presence

Reminding me that I am not alone

Not floating

Laughter sustains

Medicines of joy and security in vulnerability permeate and envelope us here

Together.

The last witness is Nadine Changfoot:

### Last Tending

7 min people inside the circle with eyes closed, movement; people encircling are the witnesses and keep people inside safe.

Starting out being inside the circle, I felt safe, comfortable, and excited to explore. I immediately wanted to discover and experience the boundary that was itself made of people standing in the circle. I wanted to touch the people on the boundary. Asking for their permission to touch was important to me for their own care. I didn't say I wanted to touch them for shared-care, yet I would do so if we were to do the activity again. I felt some people were more reciprocal of touch than others, perhaps and understandably it takes time to establish physically knowing one another through touch.

Midway or toward the end, I found myself describing out loud the touch I felt, using words "soft, grounding, warm, tender." Feeling community on the inside came as I crouched down on the floor to join a person also on the ground, reaching out to feel feet of those on the perimeter. Saying "grounded" felt good. I felt grounded, wanted to feel grounded. The inside began to feel more playful with sounds of laughter. Discovering and re-encountering people inside the circle, Becky, VK, felt very nice.

As witness, it was so lovely and beautiful to observe people on the inside express themselves. There was more audio description from those moving on the inside. The temperature and descriptions of hands was said aloud: "warm, soft, cold, multi-hands, hand sandwich." Alex said she felt like an elephant and made an elephant noise. She also said someone is touching me in a private place and "I don't mind; I like it." Petra: "My head is lounging on someone." Stephanie: "I'm a lounge." Cassandra: "I'm lunging my left leg outside the circle and it is touching something." Jessica: "your foot is touching Petra's scooter." People exploring people on the inside and space outside the

circle, the perimeter of the circle. The circle didn't move, but maybe it would with more time together.

I felt my inside and outside became blurred in that I felt safe to move into touch with people both inside and outside.

This is the closing circle of our Tendings weekend (figure 2).



Figure 2. A group of bowed heads during the Tendings closing event.  
Photograph by Petra Kuppers.

Image description: A group of bowed heads, a moment in the closing event, when we were all seated around our (writing) tables, in a public space. Hands reach out, lay on top of one another, tiredness and restfulness in the head gestures.

We release ourselves here, having put our senses in touch with each other, our environment, our being enworlded. "Being imprinted": discourse generation happens in the afterward, in the montage, in the assemblage, in the coming together of disparate elements and off-shoots of experience. We use narrative, field notes, and poetry to assemble and agglutinate, to translate and make accessible what happened—and something carefully flowers. This is a tending, a care-taking, of self and other, outward directed, gathering new insights for new moves.

## Conclusion

In these two sites of engagement with tender bodymindspirits in complex inner and outer worlds, writing charted paths for witnessing experience. We created performances for and with each other: somatically dense, fragmented, critical, sometimes chafing, sometimes bridging. These are all small practices, often enacted in public, but not through spectacular performance: They draw on specific networks nourished by community and friendship—in the first case, the local circle of a small town in Michigan; in the second, the circle of disability-interested scholars in the Canadian East. Secondary audiencing in essays like this one and poetry extend our small-scale and personal insights to more people, to an international witnessing—a move in keeping with our dramaturgy of care, our future-oriented revisions of what performance can mean for tender bodymindspirits.

Our practices offer responses to the challenge posed by feminist theorist Donna Haraway, whose work asks us to envisage what life might look like at a future point.

Camille [a fictional entity of the Children of the Compost, a collaborative web of speculative narratives hosted by Donna Haraway] came into being at a moment of an unexpected but powerful, interlaced, planetwide eruption of numerous communities of a few hundred people each, who felt moved to migrate to ruined places and work with human and nonhuman partners to heal these places, building networks, pathways, nodes, and webs of and for a newly habitable world. (2016, 137)

In our dreamerly practices, we rehearse for these small cooperatives, small communities, healing and recharging caves. A dramaturgy of care extends our webs out toward you, the readers, our next ring of audience—may you write in response, chart your own complexity, and may these sensings/performances/writings move us closer to acknowledging the riches of all of us humans, more-than-humans, sites, in all their complexity.

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# The Together Research: Exploring Substantive Equality in Disability–Led Performing Arts Research in Western Australia

Julia Hales, Sam Fox, Renée Newman, and Simone Flavelle

## Introducing the Together Research

The key point is that it is clear how the decisions—to make a work, to make a specific style of work, to promote it in a specific way—stay in the hands of artists with disability, and it is clear how the allied artists without disability support that, whatever role they play in the project. (Little and Hadley 2023, 4)

Writing this paper involved discussion between the authors as well as pieces of independent analysis and reflection that were passed back and forth, reflective of the relationship between My Studio artists living with disability and My Studio/My Place allies. We have woven these ways of writing and reflecting, trying to keep the tone of the original exchanges and capture some learning from the Movement Together workshop. The questions that drive this research rise from ongoing structural inequality in the arts industry for artists with disability, and ambiguity regarding what substantive equality<sup>1</sup> looks like in arts practice. While representation may be gaining traction, the artists of Together Research are not satisfied with simply accessing and being seen in art and culture. Julia Hales brings it back, again and again, to agency, telling

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<sup>1</sup> Footnote: Per the Australian Human Rights Commission (2024) on substantive equality, “To achieve equality of outcomes and opportunities, policies or laws need to take into account the particular circumstances of disadvantage which need to be addressed.”

her story, making her voice heard along with the voices of her collaborators. Through this paper, we aim to contribute to the dialogue that is defining what terms like *disability-led* actually mean.<sup>2</sup>

**Julia:** I've always wanted to work with people with disabilities, and anyone else to help, to bring the voice of disabled people, up and out. I, and many other disabled artists in the community, also want to be more involved in other people's projects. So, this workshop was about that. Coming together.

**Sam:** Movement Together was about exploring being connected. Being in an ensemble, working as a collective, and with Julia stepping into a leadership role. I have worked as an arts mentor with My Studio artists (and now the Together Research group) since 2019—and with Julia since 2002 and Patrick Carter since 2011. Through the My Studio program, artists have increasingly led their own projects as directors/writers/lead devisors, and I'm now working much less as a mentor and more as an allied peer; part of artists' production crews or performance making teams.

**Renee:** I am a bystander, sometimes a witness, hopefully an ally, and we are all co-authors of this paper, led by Hales. Reading this paper, you should imagine a collective "we" unless we indicate a particular voice. Writing—the act of writing, the written word itself, and academia at large—is frequently unfamiliar and, let's face it, a frequently hostile mode of communication for many individuals. Please keep this in mind when reading what is a deliberate attempt at plain English, navigating perspective/persona/voice and when writing about a largely embodied, kinaesthetic experience of dance/movement, often resistant to the clunkiness of, and indeed the innate privilege afforded to, the written word.

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<sup>2</sup> Footnote: The artists and researchers of The Together Research and the My Place, My Studio program are based upon the land of the Whadjuk People of the Noongar Nation. We pay respect to the culture of Noongar People and to Elders past, present and future. Always was, always will be Whadjuk Noongar Boodja. This acknowledgement is especially important to the authors, in recognition of the intersectional disadvantages that exist for Aboriginal people living with disability, and the important work of many artists and allies working toward authentic and meaningful agency, in this space.

## A Type of Glossary: What is . . .

*What is . . .* **My Place WA Ltd.** is a not-for-profit provider of individualized and flexible supports to people with disability and their families in Western Australia.

*What is . . .* **My Studio** is an ongoing creative initiative offered by My Place. The initiative supports independent artists with disability to pursue artistic projects, collaborations, training, and the like, making and taking their place in the mainstream arts ecology.

*What is . . .* **The Together Research** is an ongoing attempt to understand the impact of My Studio and is interested in both the individual artistic experience and the collective experience when artists come together, to advocate for artist-led, disability-led, programs and initiatives. This paper is partly informed by a report commissioned by Creative Australia on The Together Research and My Studio, My Place. The contributors to that report included Hales and Fox, as well as Simone Flavelle, Ella Hetherington, Laura Boynes, Patrick Carter, Tina Fielding, Hugo Flavelle, Lauren Marchbank, Sam Ren, Ella Peeters, Sarah Pollard, and Bernadette Lewis. There will likely be other projects and activities in the future that will continue the work of The Together Research, and be led by artists living with disability, to represent and advocate for disability and the arts.

*What is . . .* **The Movement Together workshop** was led by My Studio artists in partnership with STRUT Dance, the National Choreographic Centre of Western Australia, from January 29 to February 2, 2024. The workshop facilitated peer-to-peer exchange, accessible co-creation, and dance improvisation involving twelve nondisabled dance artists from STRUT Dance and eight artists living with disabilities from the My Studio Collective. My Studio participants identify as having disability in very different ways. Participants variously identify with being visually impaired, hard of hearing, living with Down Syndrome, Cerebral Palsy, and neurodiversity. It is the preference of the authors to respect the individual right to self-name/self-identify and so instead, declare that the My Studio participants involved with

the Movement Together workshop, live with disability. Co-facilitated by artists Hales and Fox, the workshop served as a platform for interrogating the values, ethics, and methods of the Together Research project.<sup>3</sup>

*What is . . .* **STRUT Dance**, the National Choreographic Centre of Western Australia (STRUT Dance), is an organization for dance, dancers, and choreographers based in Western Australia that reaches out at a national and global level. It offers classes, workshops, industry panels, and performance opportunities. It is committed to welcoming and supporting artists and audiences of diverse cultural heritage and all genders and abilities. For the project written about in this paper, STRUT Dance hosted the Movement Together workshops by providing space for the workshops, facilitating a panel presentation, and providing financial assistance to some of the participants.

This research is contextualized by a moment in time in which long-standing arts and disability practices are being questioned by disabled artists, ally artists and arts workers, and the sector. The National Association for Visual Arts revised the Code of Practice for Visual Arts, Craft and Design in 2023 (Reid 2023), and the Australian Federal Government emphasized the need for greater representation and accessibility in the arts through the Revive Arts Policy in the same year. Sometimes understood as access dramaturgy, process is foregrounded, as is the agreement for disability-led decision making in the entire creative process. We enjoy the reference to access dramaturgy as providing an “alternative to approaching access from a place of compliance and logistics . . . and instead orients us toward a horizon where access and disability are central to meaning-making” (Kopit et al. 2024). However, despite the calls for a radical disruption of hierarchical art-making legacies, many of the My Studio artists find that regular, authentic experiences of inclusive practice in the performing arts in Australia are few and far between. This inaccessible context is a major motivator for these artists to initiate change themselves, leading to research such as the Movement Together workshop. We will spend some time discussing the

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<sup>3</sup> Footnote: The Movement Together workshop was part of the Perth Moves program of STRUT Dance featured in the 2024 Perth Festival and sponsored by Kimberley Asparagus. The Together Research has received support from Creative Australia. The project was approved by the Edith Cowan University Human Research Ethics committee.

context of My Studio (and the Together Research that has come from My Studio) before moving on to explore the Movement Together workshop specifically.

## Context

Ayse Collins, Ruth Rentschler, Karen Williams, and Fara Azmat write in 2022 that “while 20% of Australians live with a disability, only 2.3% of the Australia Council’s budget is allocated to this sector” (313).<sup>4</sup> With such little assistance for dedicated inclusive arts funding, it is no surprise that in the history of the Australian arts the disability sector has been limited. Further, the practice of specialized programs for people with disability has long been dominant in ways that reflect the broader institutional approach to education, housing, and employment opportunities, where disabled people are segregated from the “mainstream.” In the arts, these are programs where disabled people might participate in art-, music-, or performance-making classes and develop works under the guidance of arts mentors. For decades, these programs have provided pathways for artists to learn and participate in the arts. However, we should question whether these specialized programs, largely separate from, and significantly smaller in scope than what is experienced in the greater arts community, are suitable vehicles to achieve access, inclusion, equity, and creative agency within the “mainstream” arts ecology.

Inclusion and disability theatre are terms that are inherently deviations from the social, cultural and political normative. The term inclusion is thrown around a lot these days but most theatre companies aren’t quite sure what it is and some just do not care. Academics, and even funders and corporations, often do not understand it as well and must be educated. (Barton–Farcas 2017, 11–12)

Stephanie Barton–Farcas is above speaking to the pertinent reality of inclusive practice—what it is in theory and what it is in practice, when it is well intended and when it is authentically enabled. When contextualized by the history of disabled people being continually segregated in Australian

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<sup>4</sup> Footnote: The Australia Council was rebranded Creative Australia in 2022. It is the peak Federal funding organization for creative arts. My Studio has been supported by Creative Australia.

society—within group homes, schools, healthcare settings, and specialized workplaces—it becomes apparent that specialized art programs developed *for* (rather than *by*) artists with disability neither deviate from nor challenge the systemic social and cultural isolation of disabled people. Linking this back to statement by Madeleine Little and Bree Handley that we quoted at the beginning of this article (2023, 4), inclusive art making is most effective and empowering when the decision making is in the hands of the disabled artist.

Barriers to inclusion include “access, participation, representation and empowerment” (Collins et al. 2022, 324). Inclusion for individuals with disability in arts practices has tended toward therapeutic measures or frameworks; however,

if representation of disabled people within the arts is limited to the restoration of disabled people with the aim of creating a person who participates within a normative structure, or something that must be accommodated in order to be politically correct, it restricts how disabled people are perceived and perceive themselves. (Collins et al. 2022, 323)

The range of alternatives to the specialized art program span

- models of inclusion for disabled artists within “mainstream” arts organizations;
- ally-led ensembles and companies engaging artists with disability;
- co-led ensembles and companies;
- individualized projects and programs driven by artists with disability (often supported via NDIS funding);
- disability-led creative spaces/programs;
- and hybrid models involving a combination of these structures.

When writing about inclusive practice in the arts in the United States, Barton-Farcas argues that “inclusion implies a level of equal ownership within the project or endeavour. Inclusion is investment. Inclusion is ownership by the artist” (2017, 12). Likewise, representation needs to be understood as the full breadth of who is speaking; when they are speaking (or rather what context are they speaking from), how are they doing so, and for what purpose; how they might gain from this act; and how, in exchange, they are spoken of. Despite the breadth of practices noted above, opportunities for inclusion,

agency, and creative leadership for disabled artists are incredibly limited within the Australian arts ecology. Furthermore, what characterizes accessible, disability-led practice and genuine creative agency for disabled artists remains largely unclear.

We are interested in creating a space for creativity and arts making that has a collaborative and choice-driven process dramaturgy. My Studio artists talk about agency as a key finding of the Together Research. Empowered creative practice for artists with disability must feature a constant “return to choice.” This is done through routines and ways of working where, after a choice has been made and acted upon, decision making circles *back* to the artist(s) with disability. This means that a consultation phase about an idea or project is never enough. If a creative project is going to be disability-led, the artists with disability must have decision-making power at *all* stages of a work’s process of development. The Together Research seeks to capture dramaturgical principles for what “return to choice” and supported decision making looks like in a creative process and what it requires from allied artists.

The artists at the heart of the Together Research project all live in Western Australia and work within a network of practitioners with lived experience of disability who have been creating their own works with the support of a range of local initiatives: the *Seven Collective* (My Place, 2020–21), *Kolyang Lab* (Performing Lines, 2022) and My Place’s My Studio program (2020 onward). The allied artists and researchers all work within this practice too: as peer collaborators, mentors, supporters, and producers. My Studio collaborators work with allies such as Fox, whose role requires them to support artists like Julia Hales and the other My Studio collaborators to lead their own practice.<sup>5</sup> The Together Research artists identifying as living with disability have been involved with My Studio in various capacities, as a collective or as individual artists pursuing their own projects (sometimes in collaboration with major arts organizations, as was the case with Hales’ landmark 2018 theatre work about love and people with Down syndrome, *You Know We Belong Together*). The artists of the Together Research are all leading their own individualized professional practices across a range of art forms, working with peer allied artists whom they have chosen as mentors or collaborators. The Together

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<sup>5</sup> Footnote: Other allies involved were Laura Boynes, Ella Hetherington and Bernadette Lewis, and My Studio producer Simone Flavelle.

Research responds to practice developments and ongoing challenges for artists with disability regarding access, equity, and creative agency in the arts. In particular, the research asks artists with lived experience of disability what genuine equity with peers looks like, what creative control means, and how nondisabled allied artists can collaborate on disability-led projects.

Together artists work in a peer-to-peer way with allied artists, exploring approaches to leading and directing the creative process. Roles switch regularly. Initial experiments lead to new, unplanned ones. Different types of creative language are shared; in the developing access dramaturgy of directing, words like *offering* and *responding* are favoured by the ensemble instead of ways of leading that involve being “the boss.” To be inclusive when supporting or co-leading, ally artists lean into the facilitating approach of dramaturgs. This leaves room for sharing agency with and adjusting the work to the needs of other artists. Improvisation and live, adaptable structures for experimentation also support accessibility. A range of aesthetic materials and lo-fi technologies are in the creative space, ready to be used or not. The reflections of the Together artists affirm that there is no uniform way of approaching an accessible, empowered process. The opposite is true: accessibility and agency are provided through a wide range of entry points and many, adaptable ways of doing and expressing.

No individual creative process of this exploration is particularly groundbreaking—although the Together artists themselves have broken a lot of ground. It’s the continuous process of supported decision making and long-term peer-to-peer exchange that sets this practice apart. The Together group features artists with lived experience of disability who have established individual practices of national and international significance. Each artist has an impressive body of work behind them. The purpose behind this practice-led research phase is to establish a base of shared experience and language around creative leadership, points of connection that can be further explored in group discussions and individual interviews. Most people in the arts learn the methods and language of leading projects during postsecondary education (university or academy), but this hasn’t been available to most of the group. Only one of the artists identifying as living with a disability has attended a bachelor-level course, and only one other has attended any kind of university-based performance training. Though each artist has

successfully carved their own artistic path, the opportunity to develop skills as directors of group or collaborative projects have been very limited, and this was a key factor in the design of the Movement Together workshop.

Some of the Together artists prefer visual art, music, video, digital stories, and movement to express themselves rather than words, and all of this is incorporated into the Movement Together workshop, even though this piece of research is driven by an interest in dance practice. Actively exploring a range of practice experiences is one way of making this research accessible and open. Allowing nonverbal expressions and creative responses is especially important for artists who have a lived experience of intellectual disability to be able to contribute to the findings. Group discussions and creative reflections (drawings, mapmaking, writings) focus upon what it felt like to be the director, to be directed, and to flow between roles. People give feedback about the kind of collective experiences they'd like to be a part of in the arts industry. Opportunities to work closely with a large group of peers and to feel part of a broad creative community are rare for the makers of this network, as they are for virtually all independent artists. Issues of mainstream arts organizations come up. Some of the Together artists have made works with mainstream companies and film studios, but for most, regular opportunities in the broader arts community are not available.

Analyzing the reflections about the occasions when artists have stepped into mainstream arts spaces, a straightforward finding becomes clear: Most mainstream organizations—even some that specialize in programs for disabled artists—are still stuck in the phase of attempting to provide access and opportunity. But simply being invited in is not enough. Access and opportunity do not equal agency. Instead, this needs to extend to choice, building trust, nurturing relationships, and being listened to.

This leads to important questions that are at the heart of our work:

- How do artists with disability lead their own practice?
- How do artists express and define what it means to have “creative control,” or for a project to be “disability-led”?
- And how do artists with an intellectual disability, or artists who don't express themselves through traditional forms of discussion, express responses to these ideas?

In many instances, these artists have been working with ally artists/mentors in long-standing processes (more than five years, and in some cases upward of twenty). Such relationships often began as mentor-mentee in art programs. Over time and as the practice framework has shifted, these relationships have become more collaborative and peer-to-peer. In the last five years, many of the artists have begun to work side-by-side with their former mentors in projects produced by mainstream arts organizations.

A range of questions arise from this shift in relationships and practice:

- How do artists with disability lead projects in collaboration with ally artists?
- In shared process or co-creation, how do artists with disability maintain their creative agency, and how do ally artists support this right to cultural equity?

A final tension is the specific challenge for organizations, stakeholders, and the sector. The narratives that emerge from this research foreground how individualized art programs are instrumental for artists to have genuine creative control and to develop their own cultural expressions. At the same time, artists consistently speak to the desire and need to work in collective/collaborative settings. For some artists, this desire is to access traditional mainstream arts settings as individuals. However, for most My Studio artists, there is a want to work within “mixed ability” or “integrated” creative communities where disabled artists are strongly represented alongside nondisabled peers. This final point is part of why the Movement Together workshop was initiated with STRUT Dance as part of Perth Festival in 2024.

## **Movement Together: A Collective Research Experience**

Co-facilitated by Hale and Fox, the Movement Together workshop served as a platform for interrogating the values, ethics, and methods of the Together Research project. We had conversations with STRUT Dance three to four months before the workshop. An expression of interest to work with My Studio collaborators was circulated with the assumption that professional dancers, dance artists, and movement-based practitioners would be interested in applying. Artists involved in My Studio were encouraged to

participate, especially if they had an interest in movement. We asked, What can we do together, how can we move together? If someone was interested in dance, we brought them in. There was interest from all over Australia, and especially interest from First Nations dancers. We asked the following questions:

- What does being together do or mean, as in “existing together”?
- What does it mean for everyone to be together in one space?
- How can we use this to learn how to direct each other?

We had a flexible schedule, an overall daily schedule that allowed for change. We began with a check-in circle, introducing ourselves and speaking about how we were feeling. Then we went into movement-like warmups. We took a break between movement tasks and exercises. Because the time is quite long and is felt differently by everyone, break times were important social time that we deliberately made space for as part of the workshop. Looking forward, we adapted the day-to-day schedule based on the experience of the previous day.

Discussion was tricky because many of the My Studio performers do not express themselves in words. We did try to limit our chats. We had regular reflection opportunities after we would do something, but we also tried to keep things moving. We attempted to avoid being too verbal to support the artists with disability. That was a challenge for some of the professional dancers who joined the workshop, especially with their expectations around wanting to verbalize their experiences a great deal. It was a challenge to work in a different way, to let that mode of communication go. Not everything is expressed through words. The Movement Together workshop, and more broadly speaking the My Studio initiative, understands that privilege is afforded to those in the community who are vocal and literate, inside a societal system, which the arts is part of, traditionally rooted in literacy and vocalicity/language, particularly the performing arts. We support artists who struggle to work in this way. However, it can be a struggle to unlearn vocalicity, to learn to listen and to learn to communicate differently, for individuals where this is afforded to them so easily.

We learned language preference by sharing offers and stories and foregrounding that communication works differently for everyone. How does it work if movement direction was given via emoji, through phone and text message? How is this understood, developed, documented on film, sent back and forth; a call and response? Movement, and dance, immediately affords a different relationship to language, forging its own thing, outside of spoken word or text.

Genuine accessibility in a movement setting is possible. It is certainly also an interesting experimentation ground to learn how people want to engage in movement, mobility, and dance. Of course, the space was accessible in that there was lift access. It was not as accessible as it could have been with a faulty extractor air conditioner that made a consistent sound that impacted the experience for some of the participants. But what was accessible was the ways in which the movement was explored and the changing perceptions around dance and movement that took place.

Traditional formalized/codified dance relies heavily on copying. Ballet with the mirrored repetition of repertoire and technique. Contemporary dance with the repetition and copying of phrasing. However, the Movement Together workshop instead used a range of nonmimetic structures. One was an improvisation process we called “I move, you move.” In this structure, pairs work together sharing attention. When one person moves, the other watches, and when they stop, the other person begins. When you play with rhythm and duration, this practice can become really detailed, and it’s completely accessible in terms of choice of how someone moves. In Movement Together, this structure progressed to “we move, they move, we all move.” When we did this in groups, one group moved and then stopped, this triggered the other group to move. That simple structure became interesting the more and more layered it got, as patterns emerged, as material was developed, as we got to know people.

We also used sound and materials to explore dance together. We worked in two groups and used materials to “set the space” for each other, then switched and made work in response to these offers in material and space. People were very generous in exploring the possibilities of contact. Sam Ren

led a contact workshop he had devised with ally artist Bernadette Lewis. This workshop allowed people to explore new physical exchanges safely and confidently.

There were some My Studio artists who were apprehensive about movement and dance. But perceptions changed over time, perceptions about what dance was or could be changed. We explored how, with a broader idea of movement, we dance all the time. Another challenge was when a participant was not able to attend. That will always happen, in any working setting, so flexibility was key. Another challenge was handling different feelings and moments of exhaustion. We just gave each other, ourselves, time to feel, take a break, and return when ready. To return to the notion of communication, a major challenge was to move away from a culture of talking to a culture of simply being together, sharing as people in space and time.

However, there was also time made for the Together artists to talk to the group. One of the great successes of the workshop was the panel. This was initiated by Hales and run without allied artist support. The Together artists spoke about what was important to them in their art making. There was a lot of care and sharing of space in the room, especially when one of the artists who often doesn't use spoken language to express themselves got emotional. The group made space for these emotions and supported the artist to take the time to say what they wanted to say.

A key moment in Movement Together was when we asked the allied STRUT Dance dancers if they would be willing to be directed by the Together artists. They were all very supportive of this idea. Each Together artist had time and space to direct a group of dancers. Some groups worked with materials in the space, others with sound and movement. Pat Carter (Noongar man, multidisciplinary artist and performer) led a physical Acknowledgement of Country.<sup>6</sup> Hales directed a group using a translucent sheet, and Sarah Pollard performed beneath its billowing shapes. Sam Ren directed a contact

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<sup>6</sup> Footnote. An Acknowledgement of Country is an important ritual undertaken at the beginning of a meeting, performance, or other public event. It can be performed by an Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal person and is an offer in understanding the significance of the oldest continuing culture in the world. It is different from a Welcome to Country, which can only be conducted by a custodian of that location's culture, language, and song lines, someone who has been gifted the right to share Culture.

improvisation from the inside, taking time to watch and then performing as part of it. Hugo Flavelle directed a vocal and sound experiment that he conducted live. These works and more then became the material that workshop participants, alongside artists from another Perth Moves workshop, shared in a public presentation.

Sharing is interesting. Learning to share generated material with a wider audience, and the panel brings another kind of visibility, but something that the My Studio artists were in control of and that Hales was leading. Again, this is somewhat about language being in question. It is often assumed that oral language, that talking about things, is the preferred mode or method of communication, or of sharing. It might not be. Having ways of sharing that aren't verbal or using standard forms of communication is something that the Together artists have become used to in our processes, and it is something that many of the dancers with STRUT Dance seemed to pick up on very quickly due to their work in a nonverbal art form, although the impulse to revert to complex verbal discussion was something that people had to keep being aware of. A principle of sharing that Movement Together affirmed was that there needs to be multiple ways of exchange to occur for agency and choice to be available to everyone.

At times, a challenge around comprehension and codification became apparent. This was often about dancers learning to be comfortable with a way of performing not defined through rigid rules or conventional practices, where the "score" or "offer" might be shifted spontaneously (an example was someone beginning to sing in the middle of a dance improvisation). Dancers who have been trained in improvisation were sometimes challenged by the unconscious "code" that they usually operate within and that the Together artists didn't conform to. In other instances, there was some misunderstanding over what people were trying to do or say, and the My Studio allies helped clarify or support the communication. Many of the My Studio allies are also trained dancers but have worked with the My Studio artists for varying lengths of time and are adept at bridging these spaces and worlds.

The pressure of speed and time in a weeklong workshop is always a challenge. It's easy to slip into shorthand but not necessarily take the time to realize much, but in Movement Together there was a lot of creation that

occurred. In the end, it is good to remember that everyone was in the same situation, playing, trying, making, watching, learning, sharing. This is about becoming something in the process. Becoming rather than being prepared, or being ready, or producing. It is about stepping back from all that and simply moving as a group, being on a creative journey, an exploration.

The My Studio artists all reported that the experience was greatly valuable to them. Interacting with independent artists as peers was a major milestone of inclusion *and* creative agency, especially because the workshop offered so many opportunities for artists with disability to take the lead and facilitate in a wide variety of ways. Both the artists with My Studio and the dancers with STRUT Dance reported very positively on the genuine openness and collaborative culture of the workshop series. The project fostered a belonging and substantive equality, allowing everyone to participate equally and express themselves however they needed to, which included by leaving or not talking, if that was necessary, or by finding other ways to communicate and listen to others.

The process explored in Movement Together is a continuation of the Together Research. It is quite simply another moment, perhaps milestone, of My Studio as a collective of artists developing and sharing the dramaturgy of their artistic processes, the things that do or do not work for them. Hales eventually wants to have a company of Together Artists focus exclusively on agency, collaboration, and continuous research through artistic practice. This may involve allied artists. It may not. It would depend on the project. The aim would be to provide a platform for My Studio artists to form a collective where everyone could contribute artistically in individual, co-led, or whole company-led processes, depending on the project. Everyone would be adequately and equitably compensated, and this company would foster a generative and genuinely supportive environment for art making.

**Julia:** When I'm collaborating with someone that I trust, I tell them everything—from my voice—so they will understand the way I like to work. Trust is built by getting to know them and see what kind of work they do. Everyone is different in different ways. It's good to have some time for everyone, to spend time with everyone you are working with. If I see something that is not right or feels wrong, I stand up for myself and talk to my team about that. Power is inside of me, it's inside everyone.

## Conclusion

The work of the Together Research continues. It is a practice of shifting roles and adapting approaches, as we make choices together about the dramaturgy of how we work. In the studio, the Together artists are continuing to explore what it means to work as a collective of lead artists with a wide range of individual practices. We continue to partner with arts platforms and organizations to “do” the research. We keep having discussions and we capture these in art and writing. One of these outcomes is a video commission from Creative Australia that has involved the Together Researchers coming up with four principles of disability-led practice to share with artists around the country. In December 2024, we met and the Together artists spoke to camera about these principles, expanding upon what these statements mean for them as individuals. The principles are “let me in,” “listen to me,” “let me lead,” and “support my decisions.” Speaking after the shoot, we reflected on how these principles apply to a lot of communities fighting to be represented in Australia’s art industry and cultural ecology. Like accessibility without agency, representation without voice isn’t representation at all. We acknowledge the breadth of work being done at the grass roots in parallel with our own. We are part of a great movement, together.

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# Cognitive Accessibility, Ethics, and Rights in Research

Matthew Reason, Kelsie Acton, and Daniel Foulds

## Introduction

Research ethics describe processes designed to ensure informed consent and the avoidance of harm. In the context of research with people with learning disabilities, these processes are often inaccessible. Ethics processes have also been critiqued for hardwiring a deficit model that makes presumptions of vulnerability or incapacity. Indeed, ethics and learning disability research as a whole has been criticized for being paternalistic and overly protectionist (Boxall and Ralph 2011; McDonald and Kidney 2012). Research ethics, as a result, becomes something done for (or even to) learning disabled people, rather than something that is done with or by them.

Our thread from ethics and accessibility to dramaturgy is rooted in ideas of care. Maaïke Bleeker defines the act of doing dramaturgy as an act of responsiveness and, drawing on Donna Haraway (2016, 34), response-ability, “a praxis of care that involves the capacity to attend to and respond within the messy worlds we inhabit and participate in” (Bleeker 2023, 12). This definition aligns with understandings of access as responsive, emergent, and full of care (Prentice, Gotkin, and Lin 2021). Meanwhile Jessica Watkin calls for a disability dramaturgy that “considers care at every point of invitation into the work” (2022, 37). In this paper, we present and critique the ethics processes of a creative research project called I’m Me. We discuss what we have learned about responsiveness and response-ability in making these processes (more) accessible to people with learning disabilities and autism.

In the context of performance, access is often thought of as an adaptation challenge, where content is translated between mediums (e.g., audio description of visual materials or captioning of spoken text, music, and

soundscapes). Elizabeth Ellcessor, however, proposes that *meaningful use*, is a far more significant criterion for access (2016, 6). If adaptations aren't used, this suggests that more fundamental structural changes are required.

In reflecting on our understanding of the intersection of access and ethics, we identified four interlinked elements:

- First, the framing of ethics as being about *rights*. We propose this provides a counternarrative to discourses of vulnerability and incapacity that surround doing research with people with learning disabilities.
- Second, access is about enabling clear understanding. This includes both in the moment understanding and retaining understanding in memory.
- Third, access is about being able to participate and contribute equitably. Following Ellcessor (2016), we describe this in terms of *meaningful participation*.
- Finally, access should always be a responsive process (Jones, Collins, and Zbitnew 2021; Hamraie 2018). It should be actively revisited to ensure that it is genuinely a relational process about the people involved (Konrad 2021).

Often, access is about an end goal, access to something rather than access as a thing in itself. However, we recognize that access is also a value held by and across disability communities. As a value, access includes affective or emotional qualities (Mingus 2011; Ho, Mingus, and Wong 2019) or can be revolutionary and liberatory (Dokumaci 2023, 25).

Given the context of our project, this contribution is primarily focused on what can be termed “cognitive accessibility.” This is an under-researched area that encompasses differences in memory, problem-solving, sequencing, attention/awareness, reading, writing, and graphical comprehension (Kärpören 2021; Miesenberget al. 2019). This is not to disregard other access questions but is in response to the most pressing access needs of the context in which we were working. Our language use also reflects our context. Disability language is complex and changes depending on geography. In other contexts, the artists involved in I'm Me might be variously referred to as neurodivergent artists, cognitively disabled artists, developmentally disabled artists, artists

with intellectual and developmental disabilities, or artists deemed developmentally disabled. Artists use these different language choices to signal their different approaches to understanding disability and ableism. The range of language and thinking behind language in the UK is similarly complex. Here, we use the language that most of the companies involved in I'm Me use, "artists with learning disabilities and autism."

In this paper, we document I'm Me's rights-based approach to informed consent. We then discuss some of our findings from putting these processes into practice across six partner arts organizations. Our discussion includes the delicate balance of time, attention, and repetition to support understanding, memory, and interest. We also examine the evolving nature of artists' understanding and application of their rights in research. First, however, we elaborate further on our particular project and the context in which we are operating.

## Our Context

I'm Me is an Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded collaboration between Mind the Gap, one of the leading learning disability performance companies in the UK, and York St John University. The project uses creative methods to work with artists with learning disabilities and autism in order to explore the themes of identity, representation, and voice. It does so in partnership with a network of six further learning disability performing arts companies across the UK (About Face, Confidance, Hijinx, Lung-ha, Open Theatre, and Under the Stars). I'm Me is an example of inclusive research. Jan Walmsley and Karen Johnson (2003) define inclusive research as research that:

- engages with topics of interest to people with learning disabilities;
- may ultimately lead to better lives for them;
- must represent the "views and experiences" of people with learning disabilities;
- is conducted with respect toward people with learning disabilities.

Inclusive research usually strives to involve people with learning disabilities, particularly as researchers (Carey and Griffiths 2017). I'm Me has involved people with learning disabilities and autism at all stages, from design to

delivery to analysis. The authorship of this paper reflects this commitment. Matthew Reason is an academic researcher without a learning disability; Kelsie Acton is a neurodivergent post-doctoral researcher without a learning disability; and Daniel Foulds is a writer and nonacademic researcher with a learning disability and without post-secondary education. In addition, all the participating companies have involved lead artists with learning disabilities in the planning and delivering of the research sessions in each of their companies. I'm Me has also benefitted from the involvement of three research assistants with learning disabilities: Daniel Foulds, Alison Colburne, and Zara Mallinson. (For further discussion of I'm Me's approach to inclusive research, see Reason, Acton, and Foulds [2024].)

In the context of learning disabilities, the themes of identity, representation, and voice can be seen as "sensitive" topics as they can spark discussions of disability and discrimination. Within the context of university ethics processes, people with learning disabilities are deemed "vulnerable populations." This requires particular scrutiny of questions of risk, harm, and capacity to give consent. However, it also requires reflection on what the label "vulnerability" produces. Karen Brown notes that vulnerability is a way of framing the relationship between people belonging to particular groups and the state or organizations (in this case, universities). "Vulnerable" indicates a relationship that can offer particular supports but is also marked by an "intensification of social control" (2016, 319). This social control is often marked by a language of deficit and lack. University ethics processes implicitly assume that people who are vulnerable are less able to freely consent to participate in research (Boxall and Ralph 2011). Research with people who have learning disabilities is subject to a higher level of institutional risk assessment than research with other populations. While this level of scrutiny is justified by the horrific abuses of past research (Iacono 2006), it also risks stifling research into topics of urgent concern or promoting research through proxies such as parents, caregivers, teachers, and therapists. Either outcome denies people with learning disabilities a voice in matters that concern them. The result is that ethics processes become a form of "social control and paternalistic intervention in the lives of those classed as vulnerable" (Clough 2017, 469).

If we think of access as a purely adaptive process, then it does not necessarily challenge these structures. However, understanding access as a *value* and way of working begins to do something much more radical. Access as value is implicit to the social model of disability, which strongly resonates with the practice of the arts organizations collaborating with I'm Me. The social model proposes that disability is not an individual fault located in the body or mind of the individual to be cured by medical intervention or overcome by great effort. Rather, disability is located in inaccessible environments, policies, and attitudes that exclude disabled people from participation in the full range of human experience. Access expands disabled people's choices while inaccessibility limits them. In essence, people are disabled by the world around them (Shakespeare 2006). Implicit in this is that without inaccessible environments, policies, and attitudes, disability would not exist. Although the idea that access can eliminate disability has been critiqued, particularly by people with pain and fatigue (Wendell 1989), access is central to disability cultures and disability arts, a deeply held value and way of being with one another. In the next sections, we shift from this broad setting of context and value to the pragmatics of our approach to ethics in I'm Me and reflection on how this operated in practice.

## **Rights-Based Approach**

The development of a rights-based model of disability, as exemplified in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, seeks to counter deficit-based perceptions of disability through asserting the inalienable right to human dignity (Degener 2016). This is particularly the case in the context of ethics, where the language and principles of research rights provides a powerful counterbalance to narratives of protectionism and vulnerability. While these have often resulted in exclusion from research, a rights-based approach emphasizes inclusion. This can be seen in literature around research rights in the context of learning disability, which asserts the right to be included (Carey and Griffiths 2017); the right to self-determination (Iacono 2006); the right to take and judge risks for oneself (McDonald, Kidney, and Patka 2013); and the right to independence and choice (McDonald and Kidney 2012).

As Lombard–Vance and colleagues point out, accessibility is a general principle of a rights–based approach, as it forms a “precondition for the enjoyment of all human rights” (2023). For I’m Me, we wanted to utilize rights–based approaches as our philosophical underpinning, asserting fundamental positive rights, but adapt them to our specific context in terms of accessibility and ethos. A specific inspiration for our particular practical approach came from education, and the development by Tim Moore and colleagues (2008) of a charter of twelve rights in research for children and young people. A little like an Easy Read document, which is a form of more accessible communication designed for people with learning disabilities (Inclusion Europe, n.d.), each right is presented by a short piece of text and an anchoring image or icon.

This charter was introduced to the I’m Me planning team, including learning disabled research assistants Foulds and Mallinson. It was discussed and the rights were reviewed within the context of research with people with learning disabilities and autism. Key decisions made in response included the need to reduce the number from twelve in order to be accessible, not just in the moment but also in memory. The result was a set of five rights in research. This was accompanied by a consent process that focused not just on informing artists with learning disabilities of potential risks, but framed research engagement in terms of agency, support and benefits. We believe this develops standard ethics approaches to embrace a strong assertion of the right to inclusion within research that emphasizes agency and access. The I’m Me five rights in research are detailed in the table below:


Image and Description	Right	Explanation of Right
 <p>Image description: A brightly coloured drawing of a person speaking into a loudhailer or megaphone.</p>	<p>1. You have the right to have your say.</p>	<p>Everybody has the right to be heard about issues that affect them.</p>



Image and Description	Right	Explanation of Right
 <p>Image description: A brightly coloured drawing. On the left a person wearing a headscarf rests her hand comfortably on the shoulder of a person in a plaid shirt.</p>	<p>2. You have the right to support.</p>	<p>You have the right to the support you need to enable you to contribute the best you can.</p>
 <p>Image description: A drawing of a person with a cane asking a person with long blue hair something. The person with blue hair holds up their hand as if to say no.</p>	<p>3. You have the right to feel safe and say no.</p>	<p>During the research, you have the right to stop, to take a break, to talk to somebody you trust.</p>



Image and Description	Right	Explanation of Right
 <p>Image description: A person raises his hand toward us as if to say no. His face is pixelated so we cannot see his identity.</p>	<p>4. You have the right to privacy.</p>	<p>Privacy is about whether your name is used in the work we create together.</p>
 <p>Image description: A person with ear defenders holds a sign saying "Change" in large capital letters over their head. To the right another person jumps for joy.</p>	<p>5. You have the right for it to feel worthwhile.</p>	<p>Being involved should feel valuable and important to you.</p>

Figure 1. I'm Me rights in research.

## Informed Consent as Access

While a rights-based approach counters the assumption of deficits, researchers cannot presume competence without providing adequate support for people with learning disabilities and autism to fully understand those rights. Informed consent is therefore indivisible from questions of access.

Researchers working with people with learning disabilities often employ alternative methods to establish informed consent. These can range from interviews (Goldsmith and Skirton 2015) to workshops (Cook and English 2009) as well as plain language or Easy Read documents. However, Klaus Miesenberg and colleagues (2019) emphasize that cognitive accessibility cannot stop with plain language and Easy Read. Given the diversity of cognitive impairments, approaches to cognitive accessibility need to be specific and personalized. Katherine E. McDonald and Colleen A. Kidney describe how researchers agree there is a responsibility to promote comprehension, including by “tailoring approaches to fit individuals’ strengths and weaknesses” (2012, 35). These approaches might include the following:

Presenting information in relationship to familiar situations and experiences and using simple, jargon-free language, symbols, concrete visual aids, and multiformat practical demonstrations, repeating information, providing information in person verbally with nonverbal communication signals, and allowing participants increased time to make decisions (35).

Mary Bottomley and colleagues (2024) identify similar approaches and add the important point of adapting explanations to suit individual participants.

These descriptions resonate with the approaches we’ve taken with I’m Me, where engagement with informed consent has offered information in multiple forms. We have also sought to support repeated engagement with the informed consent process in order to make the process more cognitively accessible. The variety of approaches is perhaps as important as each individual element, providing opportunities for repetition and double-checking. Under the Stars noted this, commenting that what worked for them

was “repetition through different forms: through acting out, through watching the video, through then going through the doodle book [and] really considered language that was made for us to use” (Under the Stars).

In the following short sections, we discuss specific examples of approaches to communicating ethics and informed consent in I’m Me. First the development of a rights in research video; then a resource or scenario pack that we provided our partner companies. Finally, we discuss an unanticipated development, when one company developed their own rights in research movement gestures.

### ***Rights in Research Video***

The use of a video as an effective form of communication for people with learning disabilities is well established, particularly in the context of education (Evmenova and Behrmann 2014). Among a variety of benefits, video enables the combining of audio and visual processing, the bringing together of spoken and caption text, and the use of eye and body language. Additionally, video can also be paused, replayed, and revisited in an endless manner. For I’m Me, an additional benefit of video is its ability to be used across a geographically dispersed research network.

Within a four-minute running time, the video includes a short introduction and then states each of the five rights and gives an example of what this might mean. For example.

**Daniel:** We believe that everyone should be able to be heard and be able to share their feeling. Zara, what does it mean to you to be a part, to have your say?

**Zara:** It means that I want to get my voice heard and make my experiences understood. How about you?

**Daniel:** It’s to be able to share my thoughts. Part of the reason why I’m a part of I’m Me is so that learning disabled voice and stories can be heard.

As can be seen, the video has a consciously conversational, first-person tone between the two presenters, Daniel Foulds and Zara Mallinson, learning disabled research assistants on I’m Me. Crucially, Foulds and Mallinson did not

just appear in the video, they also scripted it with Reason, ensuring that the language used was understandable and that the examples and understandings were authentic and relatable.



Figure 2. Screenshot from rights in research video.  
([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3kPZAkSfS\\_Y](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3kPZAkSfS_Y))

Image description: Seated in a bank of theatre seats, Daniel Foulds—a tall, broad white man with curly hair, wearing glasses and a check shirt—looks into the camera. To his right, Zara Mallinson—a white woman with straight blond hair and a multi-coloured shirt—turns away so only the back of her head is visible. The subtitle reads, “Why are you facing away Zara?”

Not mentioned by McDonald and Kidney (2012), but something that emerges in our experience, is the value of giving this kind of opportunity for ethics to be articulated from and by learning disabled people themselves. A recurring theme of our research has been the impact of artists with learning disabilities talking to other artists with learning disabilities about topics like identity. Similarly, within this video. Foulds and Mallinson’s involvement may have created interest and investment in the rights in research process that might not otherwise have existed.

Alongside the exchange between Foulds and Mallinson, the video also uses a small number of visual anchors (such as the illustrations reproduced in figure 1) and also performative elements. When explaining anonymity, which was

possibly the most difficult idea to convey, Mallinson turns her face away from the camera while Foulds faces toward the viewer, physically illustrating the range of options available to artists on the project.

The video was universally appreciated by the companies. A facilitator from Mind the Gap said, “[The video] felt like it had the most [and] biggest response. And there were a lot of participants who had said that, you know what, I’ve never had sort of rights in research presented to me so clearly.” Hijinx worked with a number of different groups spread across Wales. After observing the response to the video in the first rights in research session they delivered, their lead facilitator and lead artists decided to open subsequent rights in research sessions with the video.

### ***Rights in Research Scenarios***

As previously discussed, researchers have found that providing concrete examples for otherwise abstract rights can be vital in ensuring accessibility for people with learning disabilities (Bottomley et al. 2024; McDonald and Kidney 2012). Recognizing this, with I’m Me, we produced a short booklet for our partner organizations that examined each right through a scenario or series of questions.

The format of scenarios and questions gave artists the chance to *practise making choices*, emphasizing their agency and decision-making power around their involvement in I’m Me. The booklet ended with the informed consent form. The booklets were not meant to be worked through individually, but were a basis for group sessions. We believe the booklets supported memory and communication by giving artists something they could keep and possibly show to families, caregivers, or other people in their lives.

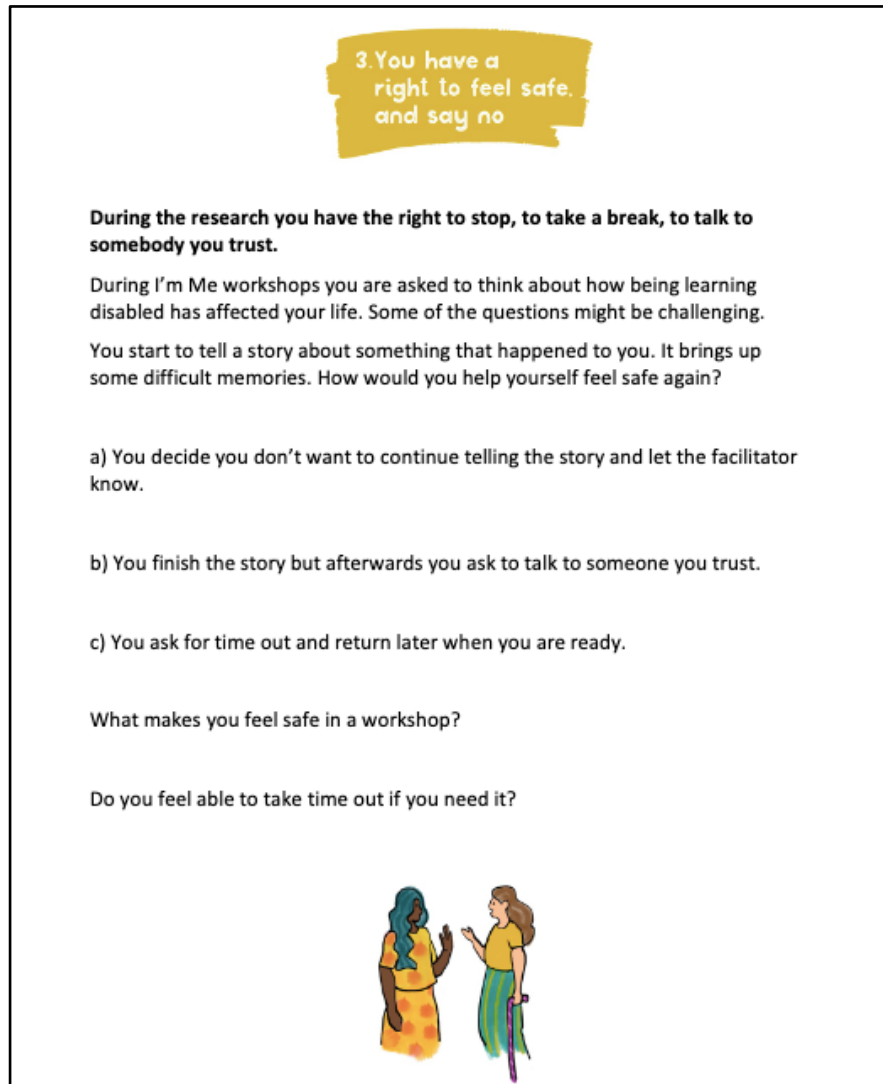


Figure 3. Example page from scenario booklet.

Image description: At the top, on a yellow swish is the title: 3. You have a right to feel safe and say no. Underneath, the page reads: During the research you have the right to stop, to take a break, to talk to somebody you trust. During I'm Me workshops, you are asked to think about how being learning disabled has affected your life. Some of the questions might be challenging. You start to tell a story about something that happened to you. It brings up some difficult memories. How would you help yourself feel safe again? a) You decide you don't want to continue telling the story and let the facilitator know. b) You finish the story but afterwards you ask to talk to someone you trust. c) You ask for time out and return later when you are ready. What makes you feel safe in a workshop? Do you feel able to take time out if you need it? At the bottom there is a drawing of a person with a cane asking a person with long blue hair something. The person with blue hair holds us their hand as if to say no.

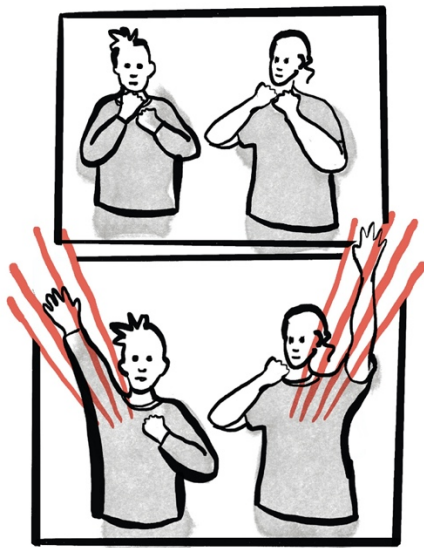
Facilitators used the booklets and scenarios as a starting point for sessions. Here Hijinx offers an example of how they worked with the scenarios to encourage artists to physicalize their decisions and actively reflect on why they made the decisions they did:

We decided we wanted to explore it physically, just because most of our actors tend to be up in a workshop, so as a starting point, we set up the room. So, we used your document and then we kind of [viewed] the different examples that you've laid out and said, OK, so if you feel you fit in A, go to this side of the room; [and] if you're B, stay here; and if you're C, down here. And then Victoria [lead artist] did a wonderful job, then, kind of going around [to] each group and picking a few people or asking people to explain why they chose and why they've fallen into those categories. (Hijinx)

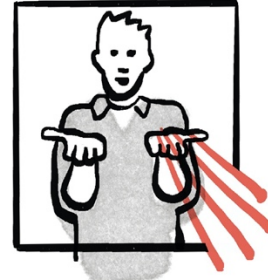
Other facilitators drew analogies between the scenarios and situations the group had encountered while working on past performance projects. Workshops also offered the advantage of groups of artists working together to understand the concepts.

### ***Movement Gestures***

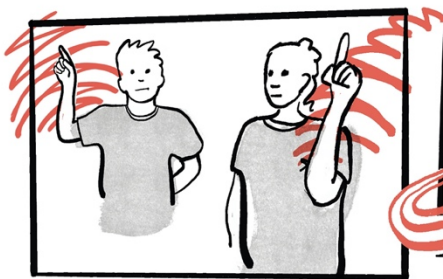
Physicalizing the rights in research was a common way the facilitators worked with the scenarios. Confidance, the one dance company working on I'm Me, also created a gesture for each right. Artists in that company collaborated to decide on how to embody each right. This meant artists had to think about what each right meant in order to develop the gestures. In addition, the gestures served as a short, physical reminder of the rights that the company could repeat at the start of each session.



1. The right to have your say



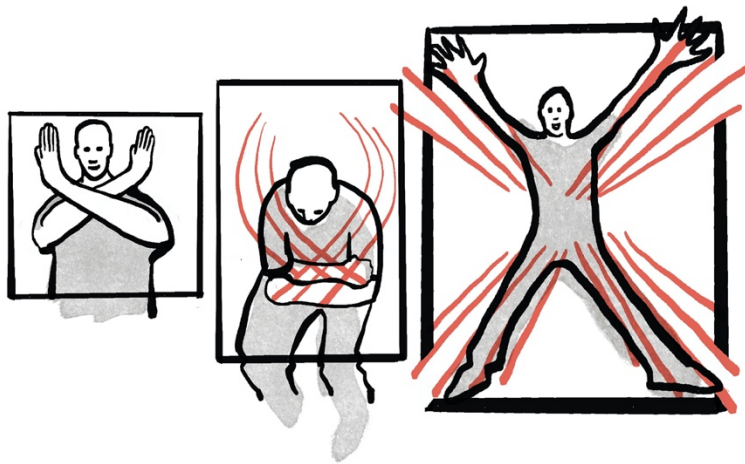
2. The right to support



3. The right to say no



4. The right to privacy



## 5. The right for it to feel worthwhile

Figure 4. Movement gestures representing the rights in research. Developed by dancers at Confidance. Illustrated by Brian Hartley.

Image description: The rights to research are illustrated through a sequence of comicbook panels, with black borders. Each panel features figures drawn in a loose and open style, clothing drawn in a uniform watercolour grey wash. The panels include movement lines drawn in a bold and distinct red. The first two panels are captioned 1. The right to have your say. The first panel shows two figures with arms held close to their chest. In the second panel, each figure lifts an arm dynamically into the air. 2. The right to support is illustrated in four panels arranged in a square. The top two show a single figure lifting first their right hand and then their left so it is facing palm up in front of them, as if supporting something. The bottom two panels again show first the right hand and then the left being lifted into the air in a pointing gesture. 3. The right to say no is illustrated in a single panel showing two figures. Both have stern expressions on their faces and one arm raised in the air with finger pointed, movement lines indicate the finger being firmly shaken from side to side. 4. The right to privacy is illustrated across three panels. In the first, a single figure swipes an arm diagonally across their chest. The second panel pulls back to show three figures, turning in a circular motion on the spot with one arm held diagonally in front of them. The final panel again features one figure, with both arms crossed in an X in front of their body. The final page features right number 5, the right for it to feel worthwhile. Three panels are drawn in increasing size. The first and smallest shows a figure with arms crossed in front of their body. In the second panel, movement lines indicate the figure

crouching with their arms held closed across their stomach. The final and largest panel shows the figure jumping into an x-shape, fingers spread and toes pointed, with movement lines radiating out from the centre of their body like an explosion.

## **What Remained a Challenge: Time and Complexity**

I'm Me used multiple ways of engaging artists with learning disabilities and autism in their rights in research. While this multifaceted approach to informed consent is promising, we also experienced significant challenges around the complexity of the material.

Facilitators highlighted two challenges they faced when approaching rights in research processes. First, explaining rights in research, even with the support of multiple visual tools and skilled facilitators, is inevitably content heavy. Facilitators were faced with decisions about how much time to spend talking about each right to ensure understanding. Under the Stars explained: "But inevitably there was a lot of talking and thinking in one day. So we did have a bit of overwhelm creeping by the afternoon. Which was demonstrated sort of by a couple of people saying, 'I don't know if I can sign this now. I feel a bit there's been too many words'" (Under the Stars).

Second, and compounding the first factor, artists struggled with the decision they were presented between anonymity and recognition. The presumption of blanket anonymity has the benefit of absolute clarity, even if we would strongly argue it has its own significant limitations. Artists take justifiable pride in their art and typically want their names associated with the work they create. We therefore wanted to enable active choice about when and whether to be named or not named. However, offering nuance produces complexity. One facilitator noted: "I think there was a little bit, it took a little while to understand the concept of choosing if you'd be happy to be named in the different scenarios" (Hijinx). It became apparent that artists had a strong understanding of how, if sharing art, their name would be attached to the art they created. Academic writing was less familiar, so understanding where and when people's names would be shared was more confusing. As one facilitator noted, the discussion started to have "so many kinds of subclauses, and it's not something that they might have thought about very much" (Under the Stars).

If we refuse the equation that access equals simplification (here perhaps in the assumption of anonymization), then it would seem that adequate time is an essential factor in access. However, we cannot simply say that taking *more* time to make things clear is the answer. More time can become boring and lead to disengagement or people answering simply to get it over with, none of which is good access or good dramaturgy of care. What the facilitators are striving for is a delicate balance between the time necessary to make sure artists understand what they're consenting to and taking so much time that the process becomes too long and laborious.

## **Consent as Not Just Ongoing, but Evolving and Expanding**

Facilitators also needed to consider memory when making decisions about how long to spend on the consent process and how often they should remind artists of their rights in research. Memory and time were key enablers and constraints to artists understanding their rights in research. Within *I'm Me*, facilitators could not assume that artists would remember their rights each week, and even more so across gaps for holidays or other breaks. This understanding that informed consent is not a one-off undertaking but an ongoing process is widely understood and echoed (Klykken 2022; Miller and Bell 2012). However, it becomes even more crucial in spaces where people's memories work differently from the way normative informed consent processes assume. In our interviews, the facilitators demonstrated awareness of this:

I think we've set the foundations for [consent]. But I think, I think we just have to keep going back to it. Just keep checking that that is what people want. (About Face)

What we have been doing is reinforcing them as we go. (Confidance)

[We've] reiterated at the beginning of every session, you know, that if anyone doesn't want to speak at any point, then it's OK. If anyone feels anything, it's fine to feel things. And yeah it's just created a very safe and open rehearsal space. (Lung-ha)

To make informed consent both meaningful and accessible, facilitators built ways to regularly remind artists about their rights in research. This might include reminders at the start of each session (for example through the

previously described movement gestures) or at crucial decision-making moments (such as whether a piece of work should be authored, anonymised, or excluded). These moments of returning to the rights in research offer an important illustration of how ongoing consent needs to be active and structured, rather than presumed and passive.

What is less frequently discussed is that when ongoing consent is active, it will almost certainly also evolve, become more complex, and begin to morph beyond its original context. About Face, for example, reported how when they returned to reiterate the rights in the first workshop back after a Christmas break, they thought the process would be quicker because it was familiar. Instead, they found it took much longer, as the level of understanding had increased. Elsewhere, we have witnessed artists across several companies spontaneously thinking about their rights in relation to the wider world. As one facilitator notes, “And then there was later a discussion on, well, do I have these rights anyway? In life? Which led to a deeper discussion about, yes, you do” (Mind the Gap). In other instances, companies have reported their artists using their rights elsewhere in the organization, outside the I’m Me sessions. This included, ironically but appropriately, in one instance, someone arguing that they would rather prioritize developing the play they had been working on and spend less time on I’m Me. Another makes the link between the right to support and their shared living accommodation.

To us, this adoption and spontaneous use indicates that the artists have been thinking deeply about their rights each time they are invited to remember and discuss them and the contexts in which they are thinking about rights are continually expanding. This is exciting, as they should have all these rights everywhere. Yet it is also a reminder that, in practice, we know these rights are not always delivered or stood up for.

## **Conclusion**

That participating artists spontaneously and independently applied their rights in research in new contexts is a powerful marker of understanding. In this paper, we have identified a number of crucial factors that perhaps enabled this to happen.

- First, the articulation of *rights*—rather than protections, deficits, vulnerabilities and so forth—is crucial to their adoption.

We believe that framing them as rights made them more likely to be internalized, to be owned and exercised. Accessibility is in part about the accessibility of the concepts, but also about their resonance and appeal—do they speak to their audiences in a meaningful and significant manner?

- Second, we enabled and produced *multiple different points of access*—textual, visual, video, dialogical, embodied, and more.

This has multiple benefits, from supporting different ways of cognitive understanding to allowing variety so as to re-enforce memory in a nonrepetitious manner. Both these responses—to the access needs of the artists we work with, and to broader societal contexts that frame them as vulnerable and in need of control—aimed to enable artists to exercise their rights. By taking access as a value in this process, we succeeded (at least in some instances) in expanding the choices available to the artists.

As a final thought, it is worth reflecting on what the consequences or rewards of this access are. The immediate result is clear: The access supported and enabled understanding of the rights in research. The demonstration of this understanding, this ability to consent, in turn enables access to research. Access to research enables the ability to have one's voice heard, to shape knowledge, and thereby to produce change. For individuals and populations who have at times been excluded from research due to reasons of access, these developments are particularly important and likely to provide positive impact over time.

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# Tracking Deaf Aesthetics in Deaf Spaces: Dramaturgical Decisions for Plays and Dance Theatre Works by Deaf-Led Teams

Joanne Weber, Thurga Kanagasekarampillai, Connor Yuzwenko-Martin, Chris Dodd, and Crystal Jones

## Historical Context

Deaf theatre draws from stories of the deaf experience performed in sign language by deaf people. The tradition has several objectives: to entertain and enlighten deaf and hearing audiences, to model visually oriented theatre productions, and to provide a deaf theatre experience that resonates with the deaf theatre patrons (Miles and Fant 1967).<sup>1</sup> Beginning with the establishment of schools for the deaf in North America in the early 1880s, amateur theatre performances in deaf schools and deaf clubs were common, contributing to the development of a deaf theatre style (Peters 2013). This style often involves interpreting conventional theatre plays (written by hearing individuals) to reflect the deaf experience or theatrical presentations based on the lives of deaf people, including both historical and contemporary

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<sup>1</sup> Footnote: In academic writing, deaf academics use *deaf* with a lowercase d—a convention established by Friedner and Kusters (2015). The lowercase convention aims to avoid the binarization of deaf individuals, many of whom straddle the hearing and the deaf worlds by using amplification and speech while also identifying as being culturally Deaf and using American Sign Language. This term is considered to be more inclusive. Usage of *Deaf* with an uppercase D is a strategy for the Deaf community to assert their unique cultural and linguistic position in the hearing world and serves as an identity marker.

persons. Gallaudet University's theatre tradition began in the 1880s, evolving into the establishment of the National Theatre of the Deaf in 1967 (Miles and Fant 1976). In Europe, national and regional deaf theatre companies emerged in the twentieth century, with the International Visual Theatre of the Deaf (IVT), founded in 1976. The IVT has been credited with the "bubbling of a Deaf art independent of the *hearing gaze*" (Schetrit 2013, 204; loose translation from the French). In North America, the proliferation of deaf clubs, where deaf people would congregate to tell stories, as well as the existence of deaf schools, where students and staff organized storytelling events and theatre productions in sign language, fostered a rich literary and deaf cultural tradition (Bauman et al. 2006). The tradition continues today in theatre productions by the National Theatre of the Deaf based in Washington, DC, and the DeafWest Theatre in Los Angeles, California (Head and Bradbury 2024). Deaf theatre and arts play a vital role in introducing deaf youth to their cultural heritage and integrating them into the deaf community.

In Canada, deaf theatre and performance had its beginnings with the Canadian Cultural Society of the Deaf (CCSD) co-founded by Forest Nickerson and Angela Stratiy, director of the CCSD, in the early 1970s (Canadian Cultural Society of the Deaf 2020). The CCSD is a deaf-led organization with provincial affiliations that supports the cultural activities of deaf people. With the support of the CCSD, Stratiy founded the Canadian Theatre of the Deaf in 1974. The Defty Awards were established in 1974 to celebrate the artistic achievements of Deaf Canadians. In 1975, a deaf mime troupe was established in British Columbia and later taken up by the Canadian Theatre of the Deaf in 1976, which disbanded that year due to financial hardships. The Deaf arts community then underwent a period of rapid change. Lewis Harland founded the Deaf Mime company of Toronto in 1977 and the Ontario Theatre of the Deaf in 1982. Christopher Welsh performed a one-man show in segments on the YTV's *Treehouse* program, TV Ontario, and Yuk Yuks. In 1989, Lewis Harland established the Canadian Deaf Theatre, which disbanded in 1994, in Whitehorse, Yukon. Angela Stratiy performed *Deaf Utopia*, a one-woman comedy show, across Canada and the United States. In 2006, the Deaf Culture Centre opened in Toronto with the purpose of celebrating Deaf performing and visual arts (Canadian Cultural Society of the Deaf 2020).

Then a series of small Deaf performing groups and initiatives addressing mixed (deaf and hearing) audiences began to proliferate, including Spill Propagation in 2009; Seeing Voices Montreal in 2012; 100 Decibels Mime Troup in 2013; Deaf Crows Collective in 2016; SoundOff Deaf Theatre Festival in 2016; Stories from a Suitcase in 2018; and in 2018, Awakening Deaf Theatre in Canada, a gathering of Deaf performers and directors within Canada (Canadian Cultural Society of the Deaf 2020; Deaf Crows Collective, n.d.). Initial performances within this period include *Deaf Crows* (at the Artesian Theatre in Regina in 2016); *Black Drum* (at the Soulepper Theatre in Toronto in 2019), and *The Tempest*, featuring deaf and hearing performers (at the Citadel Theatre in Edmonton in 2019) (Canadian Cultural Society of the Deaf 2020; Deaf Crows Collective 2016; Seeing Voices Montreal 2018). Whereas initial efforts of Deaf theatre involved performing in ASL for deaf theatre patrons only, this new spate of performances allowed for experimentation with accessibility, addressing the needs of mixed (deaf and hearing) audiences.

The recent emphasis on accessibility has spawned many opportunities for emerging deaf playwrights in Western Canada to showcase their work. Some new playwrights are newcomer deaf Canadians with multiple linguistic repertoires whose deaf identities intersect with their cultural and familial communities. This paper argues that these playwrights experiment with advanced forms of accessibility by employing innovative approaches and tools that incorporate deaf aesthetics into their productions, such as a heightened use of multimodality, interactivity, and an emphasis on visual storytelling. Their work often provides accessibility to diverse audiences, in contrast to earlier deaf theatre, which was primarily designed for deaf patrons. However, this shift has also introduced a range of dramaturgical dilemmas and decisions to accommodate the needs of mixed audiences (hearing and deaf).

### ***Accessibility as Driver of Dramaturgical Decisions***

Michael Richardson (2017) posits that accessibility must drive all dramaturgical decisions. This notion has contributed to the development of a deaf bilingual theatre aesthetics designed to address the needs of mixed audiences (hearing and deaf). At a basic level, accessibility typically includes sign language interpretation (Richardson 2018) and captioning, which may be provided on private handheld devices and or displayed publicly through

surtitled screens (Head and Bradbury 2024). However, these measures are frequently treated as an afterthought in theatre productions rather than integrated into the performance itself (Mandell 2013; Merrill 2022; Head and Bradbury 2024). Sign-language-interpreted performances are often inadequate for deaf audience members. Theatre spaces frequently struggle to integrate interpreters seamlessly into the performance, and their efforts often lead to “theatre ping pong.” In this scenario, deaf audience members must shift their focus between the actors and the interpreter positioned elsewhere on the stage, causing them to miss significant portions of the production (Richardson 2018).

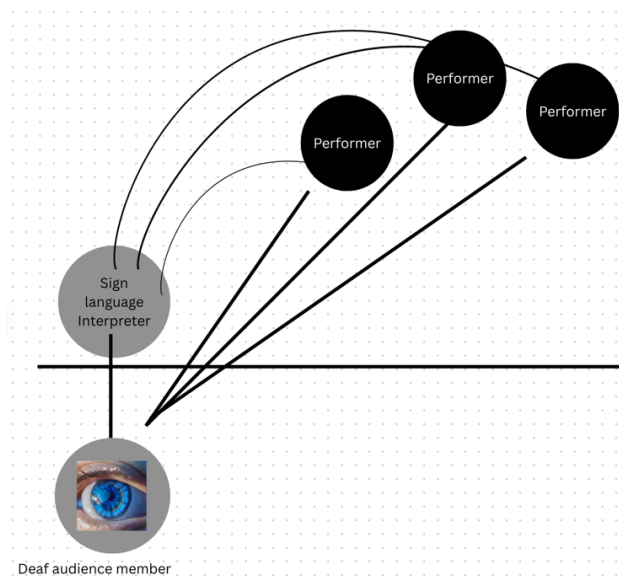


Figure 1. Ping pong effect arising from using a sole interpreter in front of theatre performers.

Image description: This image features circles depicting the locations of individuals who are involved in the stage production. A seated deaf audience member is also represented as a circle with an image of an eye embedded inside the circle. The deaf audience member is located below a line depicting the stage boundary. A sign language interpreter is represented by a grey circle seated directly across the stage boundary line, denoting the edge of the stage. There are three black circles featured in various locations on the stage representing possible locations of performers. Two sets of visual sightlines denote the “ping pong” effect commonly experienced by deaf theatre patrons. A single sightline between the deaf theatre patron and the sign language interpreter is thick and bold. Three lighter sightlines emanate from the sign language interpreter to indicate that the interpreter must first relay all

actions, movements, and content before viewing the actors who are currently speaking, moving, and interacting with each other and the audience. If the deaf patron wishes to view the actors directly, then a set of three thick black sightlines links the deaf patron to the three actors depicted in this image. Moving back and forth between the two groups of sightlines results in a “ping pong” effect.

### ***Accessibility Strategies Within Integrated Theatre***

More advanced efforts to provide accessibility go beyond providing sign language interpretation to deaf theatre patrons in the audience. These efforts focus on how accessibility looks, feels, and shapes the narrative, featuring a mix of deaf and nondeaf actors playing to an audience composed of deaf and nondeaf patrons. These accessibility strategies are interwoven into the script itself, giving rise to integrated theatre, which incorporates deaf and hearing linguistic, cultural, material, and physical spaces and movements into the performance (Head and Bradbury 2024). Integrated productions must include deaf and hearing artists working together and foreground decision-making by the deaf cast member(s). Bilingualism (signed and spoken languages) is practised in all settings related to the theatre productions: meetings, rehearsals, fittings, onstage, backstage, and tech rehearsals. Signed language and spoken language script translators and a director of artistic sign language enable the artful inclusion of both languages (Head and Bradbury 2024; Richardson 2017). In Canada, two signed languages are used by deaf Canadians: American Sign Language (ASL) and Langue du Signe Québécoise (LSQ). Deaf individuals in Canada predominantly use ASL, which may have regional variations. There is no single Canadian Sign Language (Canadian Association of the Deaf 2015).

### **Theoretical Framework: Deaf Aesthetics as the Driver of Dramaturgical Decisions in Integrated Theatre**

In deaf-led integrated theatre productions, deaf aesthetics, rather than accessibility concerns, may drive dramaturgical decisions. Deaf aesthetics stems from a commitment to deaf axiology and deaf ontologies, which shape deaf ways of valuing, knowing, being, and doing (Skyer 2021). Deaf ontologies present deaf individuals as already embedded in the world—working, contributing, learning, and thriving in diverse ways—as opposed to ableist and audist views of deaf persons as in need of help and rehabilitation. Deaf

axiology is about valuing what deaf people know and their contributions to the world (Skyer 2021). Knowledge is gained through vision, and therefore the deaf world is shaped according to ocularcentric needs. This modality gives rise to behaviour, expectations, traditions, and knowledge that are unique to deaf people. Deaf axiology is often a site of contention between deaf and hearing persons, who are primarily audiocentric; they therefore value the ability to speak and listen and adopt behaviours that prioritize hearing and speaking, such as listening to ubiquitous audiocentric media like podcasts, radios, and announcements. Ocularcentrism, in contrast, recognizes that navigating the world primarily through sight necessitates a reorienting of behaviours and values. While sound can be accessed from any direction, sightlines are very important in the display of visual information (see figure 1). Because audiocentric environments are ubiquitous, ocularcentric access to the world is little understood by many hearing people (Weber 2024). For this reason, Jody H. Cripps, Anita Small, and Ely Lyonblum (2022) recommend that ownership by deaf individuals in theatre productions be shaped by deaf axiological commitments, that is, according to what deaf people value. For instance, deaf people value collectivity, therefore the importance of deaf community agency is paramount in determining (ocular) accessibility. Such agency foregrounds community-based production leadership, which draws from culturally appropriate and relevant material. The deaf cast and crew are drawn from members within the deaf community, and exploration of artistic practices are the outcome of community collaborations. This approach is not determined or influenced by imminent theatre and artistic styles but driven by the need to “see” and therefore value ways of knowing through vision (Cripps, Small, and Lyonblum 2022). For instance, theatre that features excessive verbal dialogue between nondeaf persons would not be emblematic of deaf axiology. Theatre that emphasizes the visual sphere as available through physical movement, multimodality (captions, projections, and props), and interactions with the audience does align with deaf axiology.

Deaf aesthetics as lived, produced, and shared by deaf actors and deaf directors is a positive contribution to the world of theatre. It may even shape integrated productions beyond the expected provision of accessibility. This is a form of deaf gain conceptualized by H-Dirksen L. Bauman and Joseph J. Murray (2014) as the contribution of deaf people toward the well-being of hearing persons in the world such as the now-ubiquitous captioning feature provided in all screen-based devices. In this context, deaf gain in the form of

deaf aesthetics highlights how the unique sensory experiences of deaf performers expand the sensory repertoires of hearing patrons who mostly rely on their hearing to shape their knowing, being, and doing. Deaf aesthetics provides deaf gain through increased opportunities for (1) ocularcentric and vibro-tactile experiences; (2) multimodality; and (3) interactivity (Skyer 2021). Dramaturgical decisions are, in turn, layered, complex, and shaped by deaf aesthetics.

### ***Ocularcentricity***

Dramaturgical decisions undertaken by deaf actors, deaf directors, and theatre researchers affirm the importance of ocularcentricity. Tools for heightening ocularcentric and vibro-tactile experiences include poetic forms of sign language, visual vernacular, the role of sign language interpreters on and off stage, vibro-tactile devices, creative captioning, and set design. The audience is invited to see the building of images and actions through camera-like techniques, enabling different points of view (for example, up close, far away, looking down, looking up). In addition, depictions of time may be compressed or dragged out, and ASL poetics such as personification and onomatopoeia are employed (Richardson 2017; Head and Bradbury 2024). Below is a screenshot of an ASL personification of the digestive system available as a [video](#). Here, through ASL poetics, John Warren uses his head to represent a food morsel; his horizontal arms, moving in a chewing fashion as the mouth, encase his head, now a personified marshmallow (Warren 2020). John also conveys the “feelings” that the marshmallow experiences while traversing the digestive system. Furthermore, the camera-like technique allows the audience to see the marshmallow inside the mouth.



**Digestive System (ASL Personification)**

Figure 2. Still from the YouTube video “Digestive System (ASL Personification)” by John Warren (2020).

Image Description: This image is a still from a video called “Digestive System (ASL Personification).” It features John Warren’s head from within a mouth. The teeth and the gums are visible behind John’s head. John has one arm below his chin and the other arm above his head to mimic the movement of the lips and the grinding of the teeth. His head represents a marshmallow being chewed before it slides down the esophagus.

In the same performance, onomatopoeia is represented through handshapes that reference a beat or a rhythm. Here (figure 3), John continues to represent his head as a marshmallow being swallowed, and during his journey through the esophagus, he uses his fist at the side of his head to represent a heartbeat. His fist opens and closes rhythmically to mimic a heartbeat and slides up the side of his head to indicate the marshmallow’s journey past the heart and down into the stomach.



Figure 3. Three stills presented together of John as a marshmallow going down the esophagus (Warren 2020).

Image Description: Three still images representing a sequence of actions are taken from a video called “Digestive System (ASL Personification).” The series of still photos features John Warren’s head transposed against a realistic video of inner organs, including the heart, which is an orange entity marked with several yellow and red lines to depict veins. To portray his head as a marshmallow traversing down the esophagus, John holds his fist near his head, beginning at his neck. His fist represents a heart. The fist opens and closes to represent the pulsing movement of the heart as he slides down the esophagus near the heart. In the second image, John moves his fist up alongside his head near his cheek to show how his head, like the marshmallow, is sliding down the esophagus past the heart. The third image depicts John’s fist now at the side of his forehead, to indicate that this marshmallow is nearly past the heart on its downward journey to the stomach.

Again, in this unique combination of personification and onomatopoeia, John indicates the emotional reaction of the marshmallow as being pummelled by the heart beating.

### **Multimodality**

Multimodality is enacted when literary forms of sign language are included in the performance, such as ASL poetry, visual vernacular, and ensemble creations of physical objects and movements. Visual storytelling aided through creative captions and visual projections is also a multimodal strategy, often becoming a unique persona itself (Richardson 2017). Sound is often used in nonnormative ways; for example, by creating vibrations, also available through vibro-tactile devices, which can be felt as well as heard (Richardson 2017). Many modalities are used here. The use of the heart visual in the personification video as a visual mode is tightly correlated with the presentation of a kinetic mode, that is the ASL video of the personification and gestural mode, that is the onomatopoeia, results in a heightened use of multimodality in deaf performance (Warren 2020).



Figure 4. Still from YouTube Video, “Digestive System (ASL Personification)” by John Warren (2020) showing an open fist at the side of his cheek.

Image description: The still image transposes John’s head at the side of a heart, which is a realistic orange-shaped organ surrounded by orange, yellow, and red veins. John’s fist is open as he is stimulating a heartbeat, and the assumption is that he will close his fist in the next instance.

### ***Perceptual Interactivity***

Richardson (2017) highlights the emergence of deaf theatre aesthetics through interactions between hearing and deaf members of the cast in deaf-led productions. This mode of theatre aesthetics requires actors to explore how spoken and visual language interact with each other, going beyond the basic provision of accessibility to theatre patrons. Here, “language choices may also go beyond the accessible and become political”; they may become “a statement of how we communicate and what is missed, misunderstood, deliberately provocative or fractured, which can be shown with the use of voice, preventing voice, turning it off, using sign, preventing sign, captioning, blocking captioning, etc.” (Richardson 2017, 5). For instance, silence in deaf-led productions does not always denote an empty space to be swiftly filled by spoken language. Deaf actors may continue signing after spoken language has ceased, presenting silence as an active and powerful act (Lim 2017). The deliberate presentation of these critical moments heightens opportunities for increased interactivity between actors and the audience. Interactivity requires that the audience work to construct meaning.

For instance, in the personification of the digestive system video, interactivity between deaf and hearing persons involves a quick switch between the person representing himself as a person and then as a food morsel. The audience must be able to clearly identify when and how this switch occurs. Understanding this switch is aided by the juxtaposition of close-up and faraway shots in the three images from John Warren’s “Digestive System (ASL Personification)” video below (figure 5).



Figure 5a.

Image description: Here, John uses his index finger to represent a stick for roasting a marshmallow. Here the point of view represents a close-up shot of the marshmallow.



Figure 5b.

Image description: A few seconds later, John switches to himself using the same index finger to insert into the marshmallow as indicated by his cupped hand. The point of view lengthens to include the full person.



Figure 5c.

Image description: Then he quickly reverts to the personification of the marshmallow, indicating that the stick has penetrated the marshmallow and is protruding beyond it. Here the point of view represents a close-up shot of the marshmallow.

Interactivity in deaf performances often requires the audience to make careful observations (ocularcentrism), connect visuals and other physical movements (multimodality), and rapidly detect transitions between modes, frames, and points of view (interactivity). This way of engaging with the performance invites audiocentric audience members to widen their sensory repertoires.

## **Deaf Gain as Widening Sensory Repertoires to Realign Audience Perception of Deaf People**

Deaf people often address the invisibility and unintelligibility of their lives within a primarily audiocentric world by creating situations designed to widen nondeaf people's sensory repertoires so that they might see in the way deaf people see (Graif 2018). The expansion of sensory repertoires informs nondeaf people of other worlds, other ways of seeing and being (Graif 2018; Weber and Snoddon 2020; Weber 2024). This realignment challenges audience perceptions of deaf people. In Western Canada, deaf playwrights and performance makers use several deaf aesthetics theatre practices characterized by heightened ocularcentrism, multimodality, and interactivity (as illustrated in the visual personification and onomatopoeia sequences performed by John Warren). These practices may incidentally address accessibility issues as well, but the focus is on engaging the nondeaf audience with ocularcentric and vibro-tactile ways of knowing, being, and doing, which serves to widen sensory repertoires. In the following section, deaf aesthetics theatre and dance theatre practices are documented in four recent productions that are deaf-led (deaf director, performers, and/or playwrights).

### **Deaf Aesthetics Theatre Practices in Western Canada Theatre Productions**

Landon Krentz, a deaf playwright and performer, organized the conference *Awakening Deaf Theatre* in Montreal in 2018. A number of deaf writers, performers, and theatre directors met with DJ Kurs (director of DeafWest Theatre in Los Angeles) and Troy Kotsur (who later won an Academy Award for his role in *CODA*) (Seeing Voices Montreal 2018). Although some deaf theatre groups (Deaf Crows, 100 Decibels, Seeing Voices) had already been established prior to Krentz's event, this conference resulted in an outpouring of new deaf theatre performances for mixed audiences in professional theatre venues (Canadian Cultural Society of the Deaf 2020; Deaf Crows Collective 2016).

***Deafy (written by Chris Dodd, directed by Ashley Wright, premiered January 21, 2023, Citadel Theatre, Edmonton, Alberta)***

In his monologue as an oral deaf man, Chris Dodd allows the audience to experience his own “deaf voice,” which reflects the experience of many deaf individuals striving to perform “hearingness” (Dodd 2022). His character’s performance of hearingness is contrasted with other deaf characters (described within the monologue) who grapple with societal demands to perform hearingness and deafness. The resulting solutions, both humorous and poignant, underscore the absurdity of these imposed performances. Through *Deafy*, Dodd invites both the character and the audience to reflect on the possibility that deaf people are ocularcentric, collective oriented, and culturally diverse. As a playwright, Dodd expands the audience’s sensory repertoires by presenting a nonnormative deaf voice supported by subtitling that is, at times, intentionally unpredictable but entirely necessary. The deliberate unpredictability of the subtitling creates gaps that suggest it functions as a character itself, engaging in a dynamic argument with Dodd to ensure the intelligibility of his monologue.

***100 Years of Darkness (written by Landon Krentz, directed by Jules Dameron and Karen Johnson Diamond, March 18, 2023, Inside Out Theatre, Calgary, Alberta)***

While many Canadians celebrate the achievements of a famous compatriot, this same figure has condemned deaf people to a century of darkness through a linguistic ideology that elevates spoken language as the sole means of acquiring social, cultural, and linguistic capital. True to the form and history of schools for the deaf, the captives find solace and connection through playful and poignant imagery in sign language. Together, they create ASL poetry that depicts a kinetic sculpture of sunflowers, beginning with a seed taking root in the darkness of the soil. The joy, delight, and care with which the captives return to this motif throughout the play is a testimony to the power of sign language to give comfort, strength, and resilience in their most challenging moments. Any conflict or tension between the captives dissolves as they unite in this tender and uplifting moment. ASL imagery also plays a central role in a terrifying dream sequence, where the most recent captive arrival learns of his impending doom. Through ASL poetry, one of the captives invokes the spirits of animals connected to Indigenous traditions, drawing upon her sign language to summon the strength needed to survive. The widening of sensory repertoires is vividly apparent in the multimodal

elements of the production, including physical actions, kinetic sculptures, ASL poetry, and signing, all supported by voiceovers. These elements create a rich and immersive experience, showcasing the transformative power of ASL in storytelling.

***Connor's Road (written by Connor Yuzwenko–Martin, March 5, 2024, SoundOff Festival of Deaf Theatre, Edmonton, Alberta)***

Connor Yuzwenko–Martin presented a workshopped reading of his script-in-progress, *Connor's Road*, incorporating creative captioning and imagery as integral elements of the storyline. The narrative whimsically explores his experience as the sole deaf employee at a major computer company's retail store. It used the metaphor of a squirrel—depicted as an image in brief dialogues—to symbolize the frenetic pace of the workplace and the mindless tasks imposed on employees. Collaborating with a deaf graphic designer and a projectionist, Connor narrates his story through a blend of visual vernacular, sign language, and interactions with projected captions and imagery. These projected elements take on the role of characters, engaging in short dialogues with Connor throughout the performance. Designed as an integrated theatre production, the reading achieved a balance between text, sign language, physical movement, and ASL poetics, such as the use of the visual vernacular. Visual vernacular is a highly condensed form of ASL poetics combining signing, gesture and movement while standing in the same space throughout (Sutton–Spence and Kaneko 2016). Audience sensory repertoires were expanded through the interplay between signing, text, and imagery, with little extraneous material distracting from the narrative.

***Carbon Movements (creative collaboration by Connor Yuzwenko–Martin and Ainsley Hillyard, March 28, 2023, SoundOff Festival of Deaf Theatre, Edmonton, Alberta)***

Deaf performer Connor Yuzwenko–Martin, with the support of Ainsley Hillyard, redefines sound in a performance centred in a large sandbox filled with black rice, which resembles coal from a distance. Strategically placed throughout the audience are small tables with miniature replicas of the sandbox, echoing the vibrations emitted during the performance. Audience members are invited to wear vibro–tactile belts that emit vibrations in parallel to the vibrations occurring through the large sandbox and small tables. The performance features a dance–like sequence of movements as Yuzwenko–Martin rearranges mounds of “carbon” into different shapes within the

sandbox. His sensuous, sinuous movements articulate his relationship with sound—not as an external phenomenon but as a partner, a source of guidance, comfort, and insight. The rhythm of his body as it interacts with the sound and carbon defies conventional patterns, offering an experience that is uniquely deaf. Through this performance, sound is redefined, legitimized, embraced, and celebrated within a deaf context. Yuzwenko–Martin’s work pushes the boundaries of what is traditionally considered sound, challenging hearing audience members to expand their understanding of sound, movement, and meaning. Deaf sound transcends traditional auditory boundaries, inviting a broader sensory repertoire that bridges physical vibrations and conceptual interpretations.

Table 1. Summary of deaf aesthetics theatre and dance theatre practices serving to widen sensory repertoires and to realign audience perceptions of deaf people

	<b>Languages</b>	<b>Deaf Aesthetics Theatre Practices</b>	<b>Technology</b>	<b>Deaf Themes</b>
<i>Deafy</i>	English	Nonnormative deaf voice Surtitling as character	Surtitling	Lateral violence between deaf persons
<i>100 Years of Darkness</i>	English ASL	Visual vernacular Kinetic sculpture ASL poetry	Interpreting	Oppression of sign language and deaf community
<i>Carbon Movements</i>	ASL	Vibro-tactile Performer and audience	Vibro-tactile devices	No ability to control environment
<i>Connor’s Road</i>	English ASL	Creative Captioning Images as character	Creative captioning	Need for deaf space within the audiocentric workplace

## Research Question

How do deaf axiological and ontological commitments arising from a deaf space comprising a deaf director, a deaf playwright, and deaf actors lead to deaf aesthetics theatre practices in script development? Additionally, how do the dramaturgical decisions informed by these practices address accessibility issues, either intentionally or incidentally?

## Methodology: Performance Ethnography

This paper presents a performance ethnography of *The Door Project*, led by a deaf-led research team consisting of a director (Thurga Kanagasekarampillai), playwright (Connor Yuzwenko-Martin), actor (Chris Dodd), principal investigator (Joanne Weber), and research assistant (Crystal Jones). All team members are deaf, fluent in American Sign Language (ASL), deeply rooted in deaf culture, and experienced in developing and producing plays centred on deaf actors, deaf themes, and deaf aesthetics theatre practices in Western Canada (See table 1 for a partial list). All members of the research team (except Crystal Jones) are artistic directors of deaf theatre collectives and festivals. The project participants included three deaf youth and two deaf adults, each with varying linguistic repertoires and representing marginalized groups within the deaf community, including BIPOC and newcomer Canadians. Under Thurga's direction and with contributions from the playwright, researcher, and research assistant, professional deaf actor Chris Dodd collaborated directly with the participants to develop the script. This collaboration was designed as part of the research project, which is grounded in Vygotskian social-interactionist theory, and in particular, the concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD). The ZPD highlights the importance of mentored learning where the more skilled and experienced person gradually releases responsibility and actions to the person who is being introduced to the concepts, knowledge, and skills to be learned (Vygotsky 1993). In this framework, lesser-skilled participants worked closely with skilled, professional deaf actors (Chris Dodd, Thurga Kanagasekarampillai) to build competencies in acting, performance, theatre arts, and script development (Vygotsky 1993).

In this study, the fieldwork with the deaf participants includes a modified playbuilding model developed by Joe Norris (2009). This approach also included imagination-based activities designed to elicit data about the inner preoccupations of the deaf participants, exploration of findings related to artwork produced by the deaf participants, developing a script using the artwork (findings) as prompts, and a staged reading.

The research team used ASL to communicate with the participants, taking time to clarify signs, vocabulary, and concepts and to explore ideas conveyed in English print, images, and videos. The performance itself was designed for an integrated audience and, at the same time, reflected the lived experience of all members of the deaf-led research team. The fieldwork attempts to document how deaf aesthetics arose from the centring of the deaf body in theatre and its influence on dramaturgical decision making, which incidentally addressed accessibility concerns.

## Methods

The project consisted of two six-hour workshops and five four-hour rehearsals, culminating in a staged reading. Data collected included artwork generated by participants, photographs, video recordings of workshops and rehearsals, the script, a video recording of the staged reading performance at the Sound Off Festival: A Deaf Theatre Festival (hereafter referred to as Sound Off Festival), interviews with the research team and participants, and the researcher's notes. This article analyzes the artwork, the video recordings of workshops and rehearsals, the script, and the recording of the staged reading. Due to publication limitations, findings from interviews with the deaf-led team and participants are not included. The primary methodological approach to the data was participant observation, emphasizing processes of script development and the incorporation of deaf aesthetics theatre practices as an outcome of working with a deaf-led team and within a deaf space. Additionally, a multimodal semiotic analysis (Bezemer and Kress 2016) was applied to artifacts from the script development process—including artwork, the script, photographs, and videos—to explore the relationships between the languages used, deaf aesthetics theatre practices, technology, and themes concerning the deaf experience. These relationships demonstrate how deaf aesthetics theatre practices guide dramaturgical decisions in integrated theatre productions led by deaf playwrights, directors,

and actors. The examination of modalities used in the script development, including artwork, videos, and photographs indicate ways in which the relationships between the modes enhanced meaning. The translation of concepts across multiple modalities reinforces meaning within the script development process (Bezemer and Kress 2016). Deaf persons are more likely to be multilingual, multimodal, and interactive in their communication and are often able to communicate effectively across modalities (Skyer 2023). Such resourcefulness emerges over time in a community and through engagement with social, cultural, and material realities (Bezemer and Kress 2016). This analysis sheds light on how the deaf-led team employed semiotic resourcefulness, which not only shaped deaf aesthetics theatre practices but also addressed accessibility concerns and requirements.

## Fieldwork

Geoffrey Walford (2009) advocates for a rigorous approach to performance ethnography, emphasizing that fieldwork is foundational and necessitates the immersive presence of the research team during workshopping, script development, rehearsals, and the stage reading. For this project, the fieldwork involved playbuilding and a participatory action arts-based research process (Norris 2009) combined with an imagination-based method (Edgar 2004). These methods were specifically designed to elicit ideas for the script from participants who may have experienced language deprivation, disrupted schooling, or challenges in adjusting to a new life in Canada. Ethnographic fieldwork in this context is informed by deaf axiological commitments inherent in the theatrical practices of the director and scriptwriting team. These commitments guided the collaborative process between the research team and participants, shaping a performance that emerged from the dynamic interplay between their inner and outer worlds.

As part of the participatory action research design, the researcher introduced the steps of playbuilding as established by Norris (2009). Playbuilding—a method of collaboratively creating a performance—was employed to elicit qualitative data from diverse deaf youth struggling with language deprivation. Playbuilding is a participatory action research methodology and is designed to engage a group of people—research team members and study participants—in exploring their problems, issues, preoccupations, and life circumstances. The researcher also

assumed the role of observer and, at times, contributed to the dramaturgical function of the team by posing questions about the content being developed and the contributions of the participants. Norris (2009) outlines a series of steps through which a group collectively develops a dramatic script on a topic of shared concern. For this project, the deaf-led research team revised Norris’s playbuilding steps to align with the specific needs of the participants and the script development process (see table 2).

Table 2. Adaptation of the playbuilding model

<p>DEVELOPING PARTNERSHIPS; BUILDING ENSEMBLE THROUGH DEAF SPACES; INTRODUCTION TO PLAYBUILDING</p>
<p>Step 1: IMAGINATION-BASED ACTIVITY—DOWN THE DEAF STAIRCASE: Participants create imagery pertaining to their inner perceptions of the door, landscape, and gift, during the meditation exercises.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Presentation of artwork and group discussions.</li> <li>• Warm-ups.</li> <li>• Participants learn how to build an ensemble through physical warm-up activities.</li> </ul>
<p>Step 2: TOPIC SELECTION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Synthesizing motifs and ideas into a group dreamscape using artwork as visual prompts.</li> <li>• Note: the emphasis is on idea generation rather than on creating a clear narrative at this point.</li> <li>• Ideas for scenes are selected.</li> </ul>
<p>Step 3: REFINING</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individual scene development using physical theatre, gesture, and props.</li> <li>• Scriptwriting begins in the same theatre space, watching and critiquing the development as it happens.</li> <li>• A deaf actor models the requests of the deaf director and works closely with the ensemble to build the scenes.</li> <li>• Note: the acting skills of the participants increased substantially because of the immediate interaction with the deaf actor while building the scenes.</li> </ul>

#### Step 4: SCRIPTING

- Script development undergoes many iterations as changes are added and deleted as the scene develops.
- Quick meetings with the research team and research participants occur after an attempt at shaping a scene is completed.

#### Step 5: REHEARSING

- Two thirds of the script was developed in time for a stage reading at the SOUND OFF Festival in March 2024.

## Imagination-Based Methods

Storytelling to identify issues, dilemmas, and pressing concerns can be challenging for deaf youth affected by language deprivation. Language deprivation results from a lack of consistent and quality exposure to language—whether signed or spoken—and can lead to incomplete neurodevelopmental outcomes (Glickman and Hall 2018). Incomplete neurodevelopment is often characterized by language dysfluency (often characterized by incorrect signs, grammar, and overreliance on isolated signs or phrases), difficulties with abstract thinking, and challenges in relaying information or constructing comprehensible narratives (Glickman and Hall 2018). To elicit ideas for a script with the deaf youth in the study, an alternative approach was required—one that would circumvent the limitations imposed by language deprivation while yielding rich material to inform the script. To address this need, the researcher collaborated with artist Chrystene Ells to develop an imagination-based method. This approach falls within the framework of imagination-based methods described by Edgar (2004) and was previously employed with other groups of deaf youth to facilitate the development of plays.

A meditation activity, guided by a series of drumbeats, invited study participants to imagine descending a staircase consisting of ten steps, with each step marked by a drumbeat. For one minute, they were asked to carefully observe the door, noting any unique features. Following this observation, the participants ascended the staircase, guided once again by ten drumbeats signalling each step. After completing the activity,


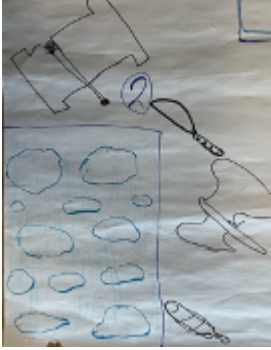
participants, without speaking to their peers or commenting on their experience, were provided with art supplies and instructed to draw a picture of the door they had visualized. Based on their comfort level and interest, participants had the option to repeat the activity, that is, to open the door and peer beyond, observing whatever lay on the other side. A third iteration of the activity involved descending the staircase again and discovering a gift left for them in the landscape beyond the door. These exercises were designed to stimulate imagination and creativity while circumventing potential linguistic limitations.

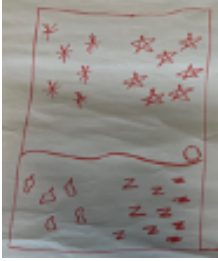

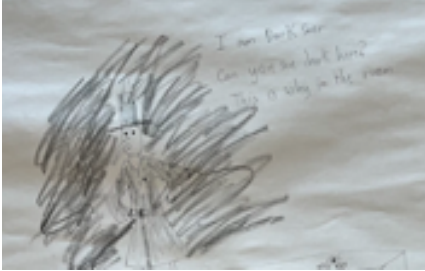
Care was taken to ensure that participants were not pressured into engaging with the meditation activities. The researcher emphasized that participants should stop immediately if they experienced discomfort, confusion, or anxiety. For those opting out, alternative activities were provided, such as drawing a door, illustrating the landscape beyond the door, or depicting the gift without entering a deep meditative state. Following the activities, the youth participants were invited to share their drawings with the group and explain their interpretations using sign language. These short presentations were video recorded, and their signing was transcribed by sign language interpreters assigned to the research team. To ensure accuracy, the deaf research team reviewed the interpreters' transcripts, verifying that the intended messages were faithfully captured.

## **Findings of the Imagination-Based Artwork**

Through their drawings, the participants expressed feelings, intuitions, and thoughts concerning surveillance, danger, the exploration of a new world, feelings of incomprehension, and the presence of inner personas that question, demand, and guide. A selection of their artwork, along with their personal explanations, is presented in the table 3.

Table 3. Presentation of artwork derived through imagination-based research methods

Workshop participant	Image and description of image	Selections from transcripts (provided by ASL interpreters)
Evan	 <p>Image description: The image of the door has arms and hands that are joined together, with eyes around the door frame, arms and hands that are joined together. Hands and eyes are also placed around the door.</p>	<p>“I’m feeling watched, definitely feeling watched, and the hands that were joined together, I could feel come out and touch and tap me.”</p>
Ibrahim	 <p>Image description: The door has opened onto an inner landscape. The door reveals clouds and there are weapons: a baseball bat, a knife, and an axe head.</p>	<p>“I opened the door and looked inside; the space seemed to be like white clouds or orbs; white clouds, there it is, so I was looking around at all the clouds and sort of looked around the corner and it was almost like this metal weapon and a baseball bat.”</p>

<p>Catriona</p>	 <p>Image description: The door opens onto a landscape showing stars in a variety of shapes, and a sun.</p>	<p>"I went into the space, and I saw the sun, but it was a different shape and strange. The stars were there too but [there were] different shapes and they were all gold colored."</p>
<p>Daniel</p>	 <p>Image description: The door opens onto a landscape featuring a cloud-like shape that seems comprised of gold, flickering lights.</p>	<p>"Opening the door and there was like flickering lights that I could see through the door, and it was the universe as well; there was stars there was I was feeling very inspired by what I saw; it was beautiful and ghostly, at the same time, there was no understanding between me."</p>
<p>Carlos</p>	 <p>Image description: The door opens onto a landscape where a person in a tall hat appears. Words are</p>	<p>"Something was coming towards me; seemed to have a tall hat on its head and walking towards me [with] a long nose. I was a little bit scared, it was a little bit creepy, searching for something; [the stranger asked], why are you in this dark space?"</p>

	<p>printed above his head:          "I am Dark Seer. Can you          dark here? This is why in          the room."</p>	
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Note: The images appearing in table 3 are all drawings produced by participants who engaged in the imagination-based activity described above.

Many of the images generated during the imagination-based activity, including those featured in table 3, were incorporated into the script during the devising process. The deaf-led research team envisioned this integration as constructing a "dreamscape" from which the script could be discovered, molded, and shaped. Incorporating these images served to honour the participants' contributions while engaging them in the exploration of expanded meanings, layered connections, and relationships between their own work and that of others.

## Adapted Playbuilding Model

### *Topic Selection*

After the presentations of the images were completed, little emphasis was placed on analyzing the images. The director avoided initiating lengthy discussions about meanings, themes, metaphors, or interpretations. Instead, the willingness to suspend analysis or judgment transitioned naturally into script development. To begin, the research team devised activities aimed at expanding upon the drawings shared by the workshop participants. Initially, the focus was not on constructing a cohesive narrative, but rather deeply exploring the imagery. The dramatic exercises were developed directly from the imagery presented by the participants. Recognizing the participants' varied linguistic repertoires, the first activity involved developing a sign language vocabulary to serve as shorthand descriptors for the imagery in their drawings. The director, Thurga Kanagasekarampillai, then introduced a series of movement-based activities to explore how individuals might navigate the landscapes beyond the door. These activities included walking through rivers, traversing oil slicks, bumping into invisible trees, and rolling on the floor. Participants were subsequently asked to select one element from

their individual landscapes and perform it with support from their peers, including professional actor Chris Dodd. This collaborative approach fostered a sense of shared exploration and creativity while deepening engagement with the imagery.

### ***Refining***

Using the artwork as visual prompts, the participants engaged in merging their individual selections into a collective “dreamscape” through improvisation activities. Thurga, the director, facilitated this process with care, pausing frequently to engage in discussions with the actors and modifying activities to align with the participants’ levels of understanding.

### ***Scripting***

During the improvisational activities, the playwright documented the script based on what was signed and enacted by the participants under the director’s guidance. The researcher adopted a dramaturgical role, posing questions to the playwrights, director, and participants to clarify meanings, intentions, actions, and development of sequences. The physicality of working out scenes prompted by participant-generated artwork evolved into a cohesive narrative, emphasizing the interface between inner and outer worlds, with the door serving as a hinge between the two. The resulting narrative focused on a father’s journey with his son to find an abducted wife and mother. The performance intricately weaves together preoccupations from two worlds: outer world concerns, as explained by the participants via video recordings following the imagination-based activities, such as alcoholism, forced displacement, ruptured familial relationships, and the search for safety; and inner world concerns, including confronting personal demons, finding inner refuge, and discovering inner landscapes that threaten, comfort, and guide (as shown through their artwork). These elements are further enriched by unexpected encounters with inner guides and loved ones, blending the personal and universal in a powerful theatrical exploration. The cast and the director used a devised theatre approach, attempting to honour the real-life stories and imagery arising from the participants’ artwork.

## Rehearsing

Approximately two-thirds of the script was developed in time for a staged reading at the Sound Off Festival in March 2024. The participants engaged in five four-hour rehearsal sessions, during which time the script underwent further refinement.

## Performance: Staged Reading of *The Door Project*

A staged reading of *The Door Project* was performed (by Abdullah Amaia, Chris Dodd, Jester Ferranol, Francesca Paghubacon, Manual Pascua, and Joshua Majaducon) and recorded at the Sound Off Festival on March 7, 2024. The performance incorporated deaf aesthetics theatre practices to expand sensory repertoires, including the use of captions, kinetic sculptures, and props, such as a keffiyeh scarf and a sari. The script has three distinct phases, each dominated by specific deaf aesthetics theatre practices. Throughout these phases, characters morphed into other characters using gesture, props, and signing, creating a fluid and dynamic narrative. All subsequent images presented in this section are taken from the staged reading at the Sound Off Festival and were recorded and captioned by the research team. The workshopped reading was predominantly executed through physical movements and with props. Captioning is used sparingly throughout.



Figure 6a.

Image description:  
The performer looks down at the floor and signs "dark" when the captions appear.

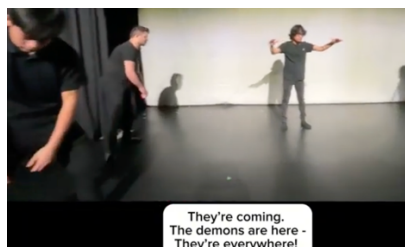


Figure 6b.

Image description:  
The performer has his arms outstretched to defend himself against the demons as they approach him. The caption announces their coming.



Figure 6c.

Image description:  
The deaf ancestors suddenly appear to ward off the demons. They are represented by scarves that indicate their "deaf ethnicity."

This scene ends with the expression of gratitude for the deaf ancestors who have successfully protected him. He makes the sign for “awesome” or “cool” (thumb against the chest, fingers waving) and is smiling.



Figure 7.

Image description: The performer makes the sign for “awesome” or “cool” (thumb against the chest, fingers waving) and is smiling.



### ***Phase 1: Younger Father Is Beset by Inner Demons***


In the first phase, the audience is introduced to evolving circumstances through the strategic use of captions. These captions serve as an orienting device, particularly for theatre patrons who do not know sign language. They provide accessibility and context, as deaf theatre patrons who are conversant in sign language would understand the performers when they signed.


#### ***Captions***

During the thirteen-minute performance, thirteen lines of captions accompanied the signing of the primary character, who is portrayed as struggling with inner demons in the first part of the narrative. These captions served multiple purposes: they informed the audience of the initial narrative context, they provided direct commentary or explanations of the character’s physical gestures, and they briefly assumed the role of an alternative narrator.

Table 4. Captions (appear in the first phase only)

<b>Narrator (Father/Son character)</b>	
	<p>The narrator in the image is a younger version of the father who is struggling with addiction. He travels with his son to look for his abducted wife and encounters the threshold, which he initially does not see or recognize.</p>
<p>Image description: The narrator is surrounded by the demons who torment him. He recoils in fear.</p>	
<b>Caption</b>	<b>Role of caption</b>
<p>I am alone in this room. It's so dark.</p>	<p>Reference to emotional state Statement directed to the audience</p>
<p>They are coming. The demons are here. They are everywhere! [Demons enter the stage]</p>	<p>Commentary on action Statement directed to the audience</p>
<p>The deaf ancestors fight the demons!</p>	<p>Commentary on action Statement directed to the audience</p>
<p>The Deaf ancestors are amazing!</p>	<p>Commentary on past action Statement directed to the audience</p>
	

<p>Image description: The image shows the narrator being encircled by the deaf ancestors who are exchanging meaningful looks to indicate that they will protect him.</p>	
<p>The Deaf ancestors are building something piece by piece. . .</p>	<p>Observation of physical and kinetic sculpture being built by other actors in the cast Statement directed to the audience</p>
<p>It's a door!</p> <p>The door is breathing!</p>  <p>Image description: One person stands with his fists raised to his chin. He represents a lower section of the door. Two people stand on either side of this person. These two people face each other over the person who represents the lower part of the door. They represent the door frame.</p>	<p>Observation of the actions of the door Statement directed to the audience</p>
<p>They're entering the dreamworld. . . They're getting tired. . . falling asleep one by one. . .</p>	<p>Observation of the father and son going through the door and entering the inner world Statement directed to the audience</p>

<p>But the demons are back! The Deaf ancestors protected me and kept me safe!</p>  <p>Image description: The narrator (as the younger version of the father) is surrounded by the deaf ancestors who circle him and face outward, watching for the impending attack of the demons.</p>	<p>Observation of deaf ancestors protecting the narrator from the demons</p>
<p><b>Captions as narrator</b></p>	
<p>A black storm shows up. . . and three demons appeared. . .</p>	<p>Narrative function</p>

Note: The images appearing in table 4 are all photographs of actors engaged in various scenes in the script. Descriptions provide details of the photographs.

### ***Phase 2: Older Father and Son Pass Through the Door Threshold to the Inner World***

#### *Keffiyeh Scarf*



The keffiyeh scarf takes on multiple symbolic roles and functions throughout the performance. Selected during rehearsals, the scarf was chosen to signal solidarity with refugees fleeing their homes amid the Israel– Hamas war, which broke out earlier that year. It is the only prop consistently used throughout the performance, serving as a powerful visual and narrative anchor. Initially, the mother wears the keffiyeh scarf. After her abduction, the son inherits it, treasuring it as a token of mourning and loss. Later, the threshold door symbolically snatches the scarf from the son (see table 5). For the deaf actors—most of whom are refugees or immigrants with the exception of Chris

Dodd, who is a local, professional deaf actor of white European ancestry—the scarf represented the perilous journey to safety and the loss of loved ones taken away. The keffiyeh scarf reappears in the third phase of the performance, further deepening its symbolic significance.

*Door as Kinetic Sculpture and Keffiyeh Scarf*

In collaboration, the participants constructed a group kinetic sculpture that visually depicted a striking and symbolic door. This door featured a panoptic eye, hands reaching outward, and flickering movements, symbolizing a menacing threshold between the inner and outer worlds.

Table 5: The door as threshold and the keffiyeh scarf

	<p>The son journeys with his abducted mother’s scarf, mourning her loss.</p>
	<p>The initial kinetic sculpture was introduced earlier in the play at key moments. The father remains oblivious to the door while the son is curious about it, seeking reunion with his mother who has been abducted.</p>
<p>Image description: The son holds the keffiyeh scarf and gazes at it sadly.</p>	
<p>Image description: One person stands with his fists raised to his chin. He represents a lower section of the door.</p>	

Another person stands to the right of this person, and another person stands to the left. These two persons face each other over the person who represents the lower part of the door. They represent the door frame through a gesture of raising their arms over the head of the person representing the lower structure of the door.



Image description: The son approaches and the door becomes a threatening entity, indicating an open mouth and an eye (placed in the middle) of the sculpture, which roves around the stage. The hands flutter to indicate eyelids and eyelashes.

The door becomes a character, indicating a gatekeeper role, which allures and menaces those who approach it.



Image description: The roving eye is most prominent in this movement, which shows the iris in the eye pulsating as it looks at the son. Meanwhile the son recoils in fear of the eye.

The eye serves a panoptic function as it moves to take in the world beyond the door.



Image description: The eye then morphs into hands reaching out in a menacing manner toward the audience. Meanwhile the son recoils in fear of the hands.

The hands are grasping to indicate a strength that protrudes from the door itself.



Image description: The son, being curious, approaches the door, which takes his mother's keffiyeh scarf. He awakens his father from his drunken stupor and gestures to the father about the loss of the scarf.

The scarf represents a link with the mother. Originally residing in the outer world, the scarf is now within the inner world.



Image description: The son attempts to explain what has happened to the scarf. As the son recoils in fear, the mouth opens. From it, hands reach out toward the son while the father indicates that he doesn't even see this door.

The levels of seeing and non-seeing are explicit here. Inner worlds are not seen by those who do not seek and who may be addicted to a substance. The son's desire for his mother enables him to "see" the door.

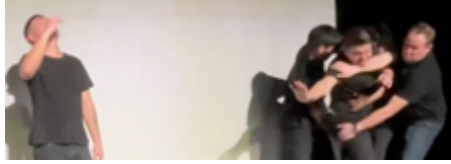


Image description: While the father gestures to drink his alcohol, the son is abducted by the door.

Coping with another person's addiction may require entrance into an inner world  
Crossing a threshold does not guarantee safe entry or a safe inner world.

Note: The images appearing in table 5 are all photographs of actors engaged in various scenes in the script. Descriptions provide details of the photographs.


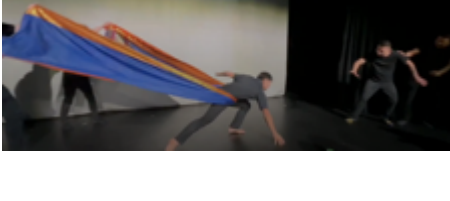
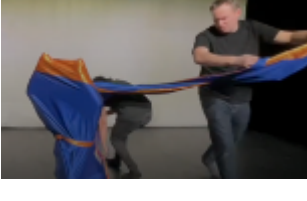


In summary, the relationship between the door and the scarf is complex. The threshold door becomes another character that represents the threshold between the inner and outer world. It uses the keffiyeh scarf to lure the son, who is unsuspecting yet curious, propelling him and eventually his father into an inner landscape.



### ***Phase 3: The Inner World Reveals Its Secrets***

#### *Sari*

The son is "abducted by the door" and propelled into the inner landscape. Realizing what has occurred, the father breaks through the door to join his son, who is unable to find the keffiyeh scarf in this new and unfamiliar environment. Together, the father and son explore the inner landscape, encountering strange and wondrous sights and characters. Their reactions range from awe to moments of recoil at what feels unfamiliar and bizarre. The inner landscape features a river with a rowing figure, a dragon, a caterpillar, a butterfly, and a monarch, all contributing to the surreal and symbolic nature of their journey.

Table 6. Sari as characters in the inner world beyond the door

	
<p>(1) River and rowing figure</p> <p>Image description: The son and his father discover a river (indicated by a thirty-foot-long sari that is blue with orange borders). A figure is seen miming the action of rowing in the river.</p>	<p>(2) A dragon</p> <p>Image description: The sari is transformed into a dragon under which three actors shimmy and shake before the son and father who are afraid.</p>
	
<p>(3) Caterpillar preparing to go into a cocoon</p> <p>Image description: The sari is wrapped around the torso of an actor who is crouching.</p>	<p>(4) Cocoon</p> <p>Image description: The sari is completely wrapped around the torso and head of an actor who is kneeling.</p>
	
<p>(5) The butterfly leaves the cocoon</p> <p>Image description: The head and torso emerge from the sari, which is wrapped as a cocoon around the actor's body. The look on his face is stern and forbidding.</p>	<p>(6) It morphs into a monarch figure</p> <p>Image description: The monarch actor stands in a regal pose, while another actor arranges the sari on their body. The look on the monarch actor's face is stern and forbidding. The son points to the monarch as a potential source of information.</p>

	
<p>(7) The monarch is the ruler of this inner world and is a kingly character</p> <p>Image description: The Monarch holds out his hand, seeming to usher someone else onto the stage.</p>	<p>(8) The monarch observes while the abducted mother appears</p> <p>Image description: The abducted mother appears, dancing in a trance-like state. She is wearing the keffiyeh scarf. Note that this scene is where the staged reading ends (the rest of the script is to be further developed).</p>

Note: The images appearing in table 6 are all photographs of actors engaged in various scenes in the script. Descriptions provide details of the photographs.

## Discussion

### ***Process Shaped by Deaf Ontology***

A deaf ontological framework promotes a moral orientation toward ensuring mutual understanding among collective members (Green 2014; Friedner 2016). This focus on collective understanding allows for the time needed to develop shared comprehension of signs, processes, and the numerous dramaturgical decisions that arise during scene development. Therefore, dramaturgy was a collective effort. The deaf-led research team, which included the principal investigator, director, scriptwriter, and professional actor, collaborated with participants during workshops and rehearsals to shape the play. Cathy Turner and Synne Behrndt (2016) describe this approach as *production dramaturgy*, characterized by a dramaturgical dialogue among the director, scriptwriter, professional actor, and participants throughout the play's development. The scriptwriter, Connor Yuzwenko-Martin, developed drafts between workshops and rehearsals, returning to revise them collaboratively during subsequent sessions. The cohesion within this dramaturgical process stemmed from deaf axiological commitments, which unified the group and fostered collective creativity.

Connor Yuzwenko–Martin, an emerging playwright, reflected on how the collaborative nature of the process expanded his understanding of scriptwriting within a collective environment. Chris Dodd, an accomplished actor and published playwright, noted significant improvements in the participants’ acting skills as they worked alongside him during staged interactions. Director Thurga Kanagasekarampillai emphasized that the unique process of script creation was enabled by establishing a *deaf space*, where deaf individuals could create without interference or control from hearing individuals. Crystal Jones, a research assistant, observed that participants increasingly engaged with the deaf community as a result of their involvement in the project. One participant joined the board of a deaf association, and all participants demonstrated increased confidence.

The devising process deliberately avoided abstract discussions about themes, metaphors, or character motivations. Instead, the team’s semiotic resourcefulness enabled analysis of participant–created artwork and experimentation with deaf aesthetics theatre practices. By maintaining a close connection to these visual prompts, the process positioned the work as a collective effort, avoiding reliance on a singular authority figure who “knew” what the play should be. Dodd modelled desired movements, characterizations, and the ethos necessary for the participants to develop their performances in an immediate and visceral manner. As rehearsals progressed, the director, Kanagasekarampillai, assumed an increasingly authoritative role, fine–tuning aspects of the script and the staged reading performance.

### ***Content Shaped by Deaf Ontology***

The interconnections between the revised playbuilding model (Norris 2009) and the use of imagination–based methods resulted in a devised theatre script that emerged from the inner and outer world preoccupations of deaf participants. These participants, who are newcomer Canadians with varying linguistic repertoires and diverse cultural backgrounds, contributed a rich tapestry of experiences to the script. The script reflects their intersectional ontological stance: as deaf individuals, as immigrants or refugees, and as persons of colour striving to learn English, American Sign Language, and adapt to Canadian cultural norms. The imagination–based data employed metaphorical language often associated with dreams, fantasy, and the collective unconscious (Edgar 2004). This data also captured harrowing

accounts of fleeing armed conflict, including the abduction of a loved family member. The door, depicted as a panoptic trio of an eye, hands, and mouth, symbolizes the pervasive scrutiny experienced by the participants from health professionals, teachers, parents, and communities regarding their perceived ability to “perform hearingness.” Approaching and traversing this threshold represents an ontological shift: a departure from external scrutiny toward the deaf inner world, where these same feelings and preoccupations become magnified. It is in this inner world, presented during the first third of the script, that the characters begin their battle with the real demons they face.

### ***Deaf Aesthetics Theatre Practices***

The script presented complex transitions, such as spanning generations (for example, earlier and later versions of the father and his son), shifts between inner and outer worlds, and the multiple transformations of props like the sari, as well as the morphing of characters through movement and prop transformations within varied landscapes. As a result, several deaf aesthetics theatre practices were explored. These practices were alternately tried, abandoned, adopted, and eventually solidified throughout the creative process. The deaf aesthetics theatre practices employed in the production can be categorized into three groups: those supporting ocularcentrism, which emphasize physical movement as in the approach of the demons to the father, ASL poetics as in the creation of the mysterious door, and the prominence of visual movements incorporating signs, miming, and gestures; those supporting multimodality, which integrate multiple modes of communication such as signing, captioning, and the sari transformations to enrich the narrative; and those supporting interactivity, which encourage dynamic exchanges between performers and the audience to foster engagement and connection (particularly in the first part where the younger father alerts the audience to the approaching demons and later expresses gratitude to the deaf ancestors for saving him).

#### *Ocularcentrism*

As in deaf storytelling and deaf theatre, visual perception serves as the primary mode of communication. American Sign Language (ASL) possesses unique properties related to visual storytelling, contributing to a sign language poetics that includes visual vernacular which is a highly specific storytelling technique, characterized by gestures, iconic signing movement,

miming and role shifting, use of cinematic effects mimicking camera techniques (Sutton–Spence & Kaneko, 2016). In addition, group–created kinetic sculptures (for instance, the mysterious door), and diverse language modes such as signing or captions support heightened ocularcentrism. The captions can include creative elements that convey emotive qualities or personify human traits. In this script, captions appear in only the first of the three parts of the staged reading, along with minimal signing. Both the signing and captions serve primarily descriptive functions, directing attention to the physical actions that establish the setting and supporting the ocularcentrism that dominates the play. Unlike traditional theatre, where long monologues or dialogues between characters shape and deepen the plot through spoken interactions, ocularcentrism—a deaf aesthetics theatre practice—focuses on presenting salient and vital information through ASL poetics; for example, the kinetic sculpture which furthers the plot through its abduction of the mother, and later, the son. The kinetic sculpture also functions as a portal into an inner landscape where all family members eventually meet. This approach enhances audience engagement and facilitates comprehension of the plot.

### *Multimodality*

As in deaf storytelling, the script incorporates layers of multimodal interactions, blending various forms of communication and expression. These include choreographed sequences depicting demons approaching, protective actions by Deaf ancestors, the kinetic sculpture of the door as a threshold to the inner world, and the use of the sari to embody multiple characters within the dreamscape. The script also features instances of *multimodal transductions*, which involve presenting an idea, concept, or incident across multiple modalities (Skyer 2023). In the first third of the performance, the captions, signing, and choreographed movements of demons and Deaf ancestors collectively convey a single concept: the imminent attack by demons, which is warded off by the protective actions of the Deaf ancestors. In the second third of the performance, the interplay of the eye, hands, and mouth symbolizes both challenges and strengths in a deaf person’s life. The panoptic eye represents the experience of being watched and scrutinized, while simultaneously reflecting the reliance on ocularcentrism and hypervigilance required for navigating the world. The hands, though menacing in appearance, also signify the central role of visual–spatial modality in sign language. The final third of the performance highlights the transformative use of the sari to denote multiple characters within the

inner world, symbolizing the metamorphoses necessary to “see” the abducted mother. Rather than providing one-to-one correlations between modes and concepts, these multimodal presentations create layers of meaning. This layering enriches the audience’s understanding by offering diverse perspectives through different modes.

### *Perceptual Interactivity*

In the first part of the script, interactivity between the audience and the character is established through the younger father’s narration as he struggles with his demons and is rescued by his Deaf ancestors. The father directly conveys his fears, anxiety, and gratitude to the audience using a combination of signing, captions, and choreographed movements. This multimodal approach ensures that his internal experiences are both visually and emotionally accessible.

In the second part of the script, interactivity demands more from the audience, requiring them to actively engage with and fill in the gaps deliberately left by the absence of full spoken or signed language. The silent presentation of the kinetic sculpture of the door and its behaviour challenges conventional notions of what a door represents. Instead of serving as a mere passageway, the door emerges as a gatekeeper, a seductive force, and a symbolic threshold. While these interpretations are not made explicit through language, the physicality of the door’s movements provides enough information for the audience to form their own perceptions about its nature. The deliberate use of silence in this section challenges the audience to interpret the unfolding events, enhancing the interplay between actors and between the actors and the audience. This deaf aesthetics practice of heightening interactivity through silence not only deepens the audience’s engagement but also increases accessibility by emphasizing visual and physical storytelling.

## **Conclusion**

The documented processes in the creation of *The Door Project* highlight how commitments to deaf axiologies and ontologies facilitated the establishment of a deaf space. This space enabled the deaf-led team to develop and adopt deaf aesthetics theatre practices without access supports or ally facilitation during script development and the performance itself. The result is a truly

accessible performance for deaf and hearing (that is, mixed) theatre audiences. The relationships between the languages, deaf aesthetics theatre practices, material resources, choreographed movements, technology, and themes concerning the deaf experience can be characterized as taut, direct, and economical, with ocularcentrism—that is, the dominance of salient features accessed visually—taking precedence. Dramaturgical decisions informed by deaf axiological and ontological commitments naturally gave rise to deaf aesthetics theatre practices, which in turn provided a seamless segue into accessibility strategies. These dramaturgical decisions reflect *semiotic resourcefulness*, demonstrated through the deliberate relationships between languages, deaf aesthetics theatre practices, material resources, choreographed movements, technology, and themes.

In *The Door Project*, accessibility emerged as an organic outcome of the deaf aesthetics theatre practices chosen during the dramaturgical process of developing a devised theatre script. Practices such as captioning, kinetic sculpture, and the symbolic use of props like the scarf and sari heightened accessibility by enhancing the audience's understanding of actions, choreographed movements, and transformations in characters, roles, and functions. Accessibility, in this context, was a byproduct of creating a deaf space where deaf axiologies, ontologies, and aesthetics could flourish. The result is a multilayered performance shaped by dramaturgical decisions that prioritize deaf aesthetics theatre practices.

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# The Artistic Access Residency Creazioni Accessibili: Audio Description Dramaturgy in Contemporary Dance

Giuseppe Comuniello, Flavia Dalila D'Amico, and Camilla Guarino

This article focuses on the access dramaturgy experiments of the artistic residency Creazioni Accessibili (Accessible Creations) in 2022 and 2023. The residency features Giuseppe Comuniello (blind performer and choreographer) and Camilla Guarino (dramaturg) as mentors, is curated by Flavia Dalila D'Amico, and is produced by the National Centre of Dance Production Orbita Spellbound in Rome. Creazioni Accessibili is a one-week residency with an annual open call, which supports artistic research in the development of dramaturgies that consider the sensory needs of blind and visually impaired people. The project has generated, and continues to advance, a methodology that merges co-design techniques, dance practices, and embodied knowledge and is innovative in the Italian context. This methodology focuses on the particular dramaturgical characteristics of each performance and involves co-design in the forms of blind process mentorship and testing approaches in development with blind community members. It respects the selected artists' aesthetics, and considers accessible practices both (1) instruments of use "for" a particular community and (2) opportunities to experiment with multisensory dramaturgy.

This article combines Flavia Dalila D'Amico's views as scholar and residency curator with Giuseppe Comuniello and Camilla Guarino's notes as mentors and dance artists. These three authors describe and discuss how different solutions were tried out in the first two years of the residency. Despite their aesthetic differences, the two project teams in residency elected to work on audio description (hereafter AD), which is why the article focuses particularly on this tool and how it can be integrated into choreography.

## The Italian Context

In Italy there are still many communities, in particular the blind and visually impaired people, who are excluded by various types of performance events (i.e., dance and theatre). Even when accessibility tools such as AD are present, they are most often conceived and used on the sidelines so as “not to disturb” nondisabled audience members. In contrast, the objective of Creazioni Accessibili is to offer a space for artistic research and creation based on accessibility, so that it can be integrated into the design phase of the performance making and not merely as an auxiliary tool. Therefore, the nature of this project must be contextualized within a frame (that of Italian cultural policies) that finds it difficult to consider cultural accessibility as a right, even though it is protected by a law (no. 104 of 1992). Italian activist and scholar Ilaria Crippi writes:

There are types of people whose ability to participate is taken for granted and others whose presence remains negotiable. . . . [C]alling oneself anti-ableist has a number of uncomfortable practical consequences: rejecting the normalization of the exclusion of people with disabilities due to physical and sensory barriers, . . . stopping considering accessibility as an extemporaneous emergency to be plugged in when someone complains, and instead treating it as one of the tasks to be anticipated and managed on a routine basis. If such an approach seems strange to us, it is because the ableist system has accustomed us to thinking that it is exclusion that is normal. (2024, 88, 187, and 190)

Attention to the accessibility of blind and visually impaired communities to cultural products has spread in Italy since the 1990s, initially in the fields of exhibit design and audiovisual communication, and only in more recent years in the performing arts field. This means that the presence of blind and visually impaired people has been considered “negotiable,” to quote Crippi, for much of Italian cultural history. Although AD and touch tours facilitate participation in theatre performances or film screenings, they are still not very popular tools for contemporary dance performances. There are several reasons for this gap. The most obvious one is that the nonverbal and continuously dynamic character of dance can be less available for translation into speech. As the scholars Bettina Bläsing and Esther Zimmermann suggest:

Dance provides specific challenges for audio description—unlike works of the fine arts, dance works are fleeting and constantly in motion; unlike film and drama, they are often entirely non-verbal, and their content is often emotional, associative and metaphorical, rather than

semantic. Dance, like music, is not communicative in the sense of sharing declarative information, but feelings, experiences and social cues. (2021, 5)

Like Bläsing and Zimmermann, we ask, How can one describe a synchronous multitude of movements? Facial expressions? How about the relationship between choreography, bodies, light, sound, objects, costumes? With identity awareness, we add questions about how to name moving bodies in order to distinguish them from each other? How much leeway do those who describe have over the subjects described and, for example, their political positions, racialization, (dis)ability, gender/sexuality, and age?

Creazioni Accessibili was created to answer these questions and integrate AD into the dance dramaturgies at the outset and discuss them in the rehearsal studio with all parties involved. Giuseppe Comuniello and Camilla Guarino, dramaturgical mentors for the artists hosted each year, have been carrying out artistic research since 2018 aimed at returning the poetics of the dance works to and with blind people while questioning the idea that a description can be said to be “neutral.” As scholar Eleanor Margolies writes:

Like a translator, a describer makes decisions about the intended meaning of the original and the frame of reference of the audience. The process always involves some loss, but the compensations and substitutions can sometimes be felicitous, metaphorical. At best, a description is a negotiation between members of the creative team, but it will always be partial, reflecting the viewpoint, experience and limitations of the describer. (2015, 23)

For Comuniello and Guarino, it is not a question of whether or how much to use neutrality as a guiding principle. Rather, the aim is to incorporate a further semantic level into the dance work: an access dramaturgy that is always poetic and subjective. In accordance with the mentors’ vision, the residency offers the possibility for a dance work, which remains open to development, to discover suitable access strategies. These should remain in keeping with the artists’ dramaturgical idea for the dance work and aim to communicate creatively the sensations, emotions, and frictions that one or more bodies in motion convey to mixed blind and seeing audiences.

In this context, the AD is conceived as a creative tool with the aim of addressing the gap between privileged and underprivileged access to dance performances. However, a crucial question remains open: How to gain the trust of communities that have been excluded from dance events for decades and therefore have little or no experience with stage dance? To answer this question Creazioni Accessibili adopts the methodology of co-design. As Theodore Zamenopoulos and Katerina Alexiou write:

As a social movement, co-design is about challenging where there is an imbalance of power within selected groups of individuals who make important decisions about others' lives, livelihoods and bodies. These decisions are often made with little to no meaningful involvement of the people who will be most impacted by them. (2018, 11)

During the work phases, the residency includes feedback sessions with blind and visually impaired spectators. By drawing on their suggestions and experiences for co-design, we hope to use accessibility strategies in ways that reflect the concrete concerns and desires of access-deserving people. In the next section, we will discuss questions and analyze discoveries that have fuelled the creative experimentation of the two projects hosted in residence so far:

*Trespass\_Processing an Emerging Choreography* by Marta Olivieri (2022 residency) and *Acquittrini* by Marta Bellu/Trifoglio (2023 residency).

## **The First Year of Creazioni Accessibili**

In Marta Olivieri's *Trespass\_Processing an Emerging Choreography* (premiered in 2021), two dancers generate behaviour and movement based on input received from the environment, those who pass through it, and the sounds and the clothes they wear.

The mentors' methodology generally is to entrust the initial part of the residence facilitation to the dramaturg Camilla Guarino, leaving Giuseppe Comuniello to arrive at a later stage to assess the effectiveness for a blind person of the developed AD with reference to the soundscape. Comuniello also arrives at a later stage to ensure that the evaluation of the AD simulates the experience of a spectator attending the performance for the first time, without familiarity with artistic intentions or preconditioning from witnessing the early residency work.

The initial creation of the AD is preceded by a series of exercises proposed by Guarino to stimulate questions and the imagination while clarifying artistic necessities.

### ***The Dramaturg's Notes from the Process***

Camilla Guarino

In the residency, *Trespass* became a performance involving two spaces: one dedicated to sound, including the two voices of the live AD, and the other designated for the dancers' movement. The audience is free to move through both spaces, which are separated in part by a black curtain. We selected specific sections and features in the dance work for improvised generation of audio description during performance. These were the clothes, body postures, the surrounding space, some phrases that while describing evoke a poetic tone.

In the choreography, we see an accumulation of progressive movements over time. The AD tries to repeat the same dynamic, accumulating anatomical descriptions of the movements. The exercises proposed on the first day were chosen to investigate different, but related, points of view on to the same choreographic score. While recording ourselves with a phone, each of us described what we were experiencing. Vera described from her perspective as a solo performer; I (Camilla) verbalized as an outside observer, and Marta described as the choreographer. After the first session, we listened to all of the recorded voices simultaneously so that we could hear differences and similarities between our descriptions in any given moment.

The first element that interested us was the different timing with which we annotated the images or sensations experienced (evoked or concrete in space). The unveiling of some images took place almost simultaneously for all of us. When that happened, we decided to keep the discovered timing for the AD. In other cases, each of us had different observation times, leading us to discuss how to manage these times. On the one hand, our AD construction aimed to remain as faithful as possible to what an external observer could grasp. On the other hand, we played with anticipated actions and perceptions from an immersed vantage point that would otherwise remain hidden from external observers (e.g., "she has a mole under her right heel").

We worked with the different interpretations that similar words and phrases can have. For example, “she wears a certain weight on her shoulders” refers both to an emotional weight (e.g., an ambiguous facial expression) and a physical weight (e.g., a coat worn over the shoulders only).

Another point, which was at the heart of our artistic research, is to experiment with different dramaturgical modes of description that shift the audience’s attention. Depending on what I choose to describe, the listener will most likely rest his or her gaze on the object described: a muscle, an anatomical part, an external landscape, or a posture of a person in the audience. Here, another theme opens up: incorporating the presence of the spectator into the AD, something that the performance *Trespass* already enacted, both on a physical and spatial level.

Initially, we described actions that belong to both the audience and the performing dancers (breathing, swallowing, lying down), then we shifted our attention to postures and clothing by narrowing our focus. The costumes are an integral part of *Trespass*. In addition, to accurately describe costumes alongside spectators’ clothes, we therefore explored their tactile and other perceptual aspects: the excessively warm fur coat, the uncomfortable dressing gown, and the T-shirt in which the performer’s body disappears.

Finally, throughout the adaptive AD text created for performance, we maintained subjective nuances, as well as those suggested by the choreographer. These were often words that could grasp a specific moment or reflect on the listener (e.g., “glances across”) and actions that both performers and audience members may do.

On the second day, the foci for our audio description was expanded to include anatomy, reality, surrounding space, imaginary digressions, and repetitions/mantras. We then posed the more practical problem of how to handle the blind and visually impaired audience in the space, as the audience of this dance work can walk freely through the space and enter or exit at will.

We thought of offering a description of the theatrical space before the start of the performance and of having a reference person who could verbalize the movements of the audience and guide any groups in case of need.

Returning to the practices of the day before, we resumed the descriptive exercise, but this time with two dancers, Vera and Loredana. In this case, we faced the difficulty of describing two bodies on stage. We asked ourselves whether it is

necessary to always name them in order to understand who we are referring to. In some situations we can leave the attribution of the action or object free (when it is confusing even for the sighted audience), while only specifying it when an action clearly belongs to one of the two people. We also found verbal phrases that could provide information about space using the spatial relationship between bodies. For example, “the cheek looks toward her back” or “I don’t know if Vera knows” refers to Loredana’s posture and communicates that Vera probably has her back to Loredana. The statement “I have to decide who to look at” makes it clear that it refers to the distance between the dancers without saying “they are far apart.”

Just like the choreography, the first words, phrases, and foci described this far emerged through practical exploration, and they became part of the AD of the adapted version of the project, which was retitled *Trespass. Tales of the Unexpected* (2023).

On the third day, Giuseppe arrived in the rehearsal studio. In an attempt to enrich our vocabulary, the phrases were expanded with descriptions of situations and sudden movement dynamics that broke the given balance. We added narrative connotations to our descriptions of costumes in order to open imaginary windows on possible narratives. The costumes were also described both from the inside, by the performer wearing them, and from the outside, by an observer. In this way, tactile descriptions were combined with adjectives such as “comfortable” and “light,” providing the subjective perspective of the wearer alongside the more aesthetic one of the observer. We repeated a description session with Camilla’s and Marta’s voices for Giuseppe to listen to. We kept an open structure while restricting ourselves to the vocabulary developed over the previous days. Giuseppe pointed out to us that it is necessary to iterate certain terms to make it easier for the blind and visually impaired audience to enter the narrative. For example: “she closes her eyes” (the first time they are closed); “she closes her eyes, darkness” (the second time); “darkness” (the third time). In this way, it becomes clearer that when “dark” is pronounced, it means the performers have closed their eyes. According to Giuseppe, it is also beneficial to use the same words to describe movements that are repeated in the same way.

On the fourth day, the two describing voices (Camilla and Marta) each took on a different dramaturgical direction. Camilla tended to describe movement as general actions or images, while Marta described the anatomical, motor interaction involved. For example, if Camilla interpreted a movement as “she squats,” Marta would describe it as “she touches her ischium with her heels.” At the same time,

however, Marta opened imaginative windows and digressions that added virtual interpretation planes to what was happening on stage, while Camilla remained focused on the description of the actual space, on the precise perception of what was happening.

On the last day of the residency, we reflected on the possible development of the work: Since the sound was distributed through the speakers, maybe the dancers on stage could be influenced by our descriptions, generating other reactions to the movement and thus offering new feedback for our descriptions. Marta and Camilla could also physically enter the auditory performance by adding description of their own bodies to the description of the performers and space.

*Trespass* stimulated ideas for how AD can become a means for the creative adaptation of an existing dance work. *Trespass* invites spontaneous responses through which time is transformed, the audience is immersed in the performance, and the points of view involved become multiplied. The fact that we, therefore, cannot audio-describe a fixed performance has opened up many creative possibilities for us. The first observation that struck us was that we used principles to generate AD that are similar to Marta's choreographic methods. Using words, shifting the subject from the performer to the audience, drawing out rhythms of the neutral but participatory voices, and working on the transformation of such rhythms over time were all dramaturgical principles that mirror Marta's compositional work.

The opportunity to collaborate on the development of AD with four artists, bringing different but complementary perspectives to the work, made *Trespass\_Processing an Emerging Choreography* what it is today: *Trespass. Tales of the Unexpected ...* a new performance.

### ***An External Eye. The Curator's Point of View***

Flavia Dalila D'Amico

The performance features a dancer and two AD describers (Camilla Guarino and Marta Olivieri), who offer two points of view on a single body moving in continuity and next to the audience. The narrated point of view is twofold, reflecting the number of AD describers and their position in space. Distributed in space, they find moments of connection, pauses, and repetitions of words to create a sonorous rhythmicity that corresponds to the gestural movement observed. The words of each narrator are always different because their embodied knowledge and their point of observation are different. A part of the AD describes the

movements of the dancer (which is different at every iteration) using technical and anatomical terminology (breathing, inhaling, resting weight on the ischium, shifting the centre of gravity to the left foot, etc.), and is in turn influenced by the reactions of those crossing the space. Another part of the AD opens imaginative windows that do not find a correspondence in the actual space (e.g., “she thinks of the film she saw yesterday”; “perhaps she wonders when the bus will arrive”). The vocal and choreographic scores inform each other in a game of mirroring and live feedback.

Thus, both the sighted and the blind audience are called upon to question the boundary between the real and the imaginary, the visible and the invisible, and question their trust in their own senses, which are simultaneously involved without hierarchy. In *Trespass. Tales of the Unexpected*, the audio description interrogates the AD device *per se* (in and of itself) along with the construction of the performance reality. The end result is a movement-based narrative that is accessible to a blind and visually impaired audience, while subverting the planes of reality, imagination, power, and access for those who see and those who do not.

During a feedback session with a group of people from the Unione Ciechi di Roma (Rome’s Union of the Blind), the aspect that was emphasized as interesting is a technical access choice. The wearable loudspeakers (speakers that can be attached to dancers’ costumes) produce a sonic spatialization without the use of headphones, enhancing the clarity with which the describing voices interact with the space. In addition, the fact that the AD is performed in real time and therefore audible in the performance space enables nonmarginalizing accessibility for blind and visually impaired audiences. When AD is accessed this way, *Trespass. Tales of the Unexpected* becomes a powerful example of how accessible devices can be organically integrated with aesthetic choices.

## **The Second Year of Creazioni Accessibili**

### ***The Dramaturgs’ Notes***

Camilla Guarino and Giuseppe Comuniello

The project selected for the second year of Creazioni Accessibili was *Acquitrini* by Marta Bellu/Trifoglio. The performance is a musical, choreographic, and visual recreation of a pond, an ecosystem on the borderline between the terrestrial and aquatic environment. The peculiarity of this landscape is translated to the stage through an abstract set design—a white space on which only three elements rest: a reflecting sphere, a stone with metal Bluetooth speakers, and transparent sheets.

The dancer, dressed in black, relates to these elements in three different and distant moments. Her gestures and movements evoke the fluidity of the underwater world, changing shapes and positions continuously and eluding the possibility of being embedded in a stable figure. How could we adapt such an environment to AD in ways that find vitality in the continuous flow of the choreographic score and the sound dimension of this dance work?

An initial issue of the residency was to understand when it was useful to reveal the objects on stage, without anticipating their appearance in advance. An important subject for us, also addressed in *Trespass*, is that of trying to maintain synchronicity between the AD and what appears visually on stage, so that blind and visually impaired audience members' encounters continue to reflect the dramaturgical choices made by the choreographer. To offer an example: If the sheet is on the stage floor from the beginning, but it is not initially noticeable because of its transparency, should we describe it to the blind audience members up front? Or do we, rather, describe it at the moment when the stage action leads the seeing spectators' gaze toward it?

We decided to maintain the viewing timing of the sighted spectator. The interesting aspect of the dramaturgical work in this case was the relationship between the words, the rhythm of the choreography, and the soundtrack. There was a collaboration with the sound designer that made it possible to create an AD script that was harmoniously fused with the set sounds, as if the words were elements immersed in the fluid, in the tin, in this case in the texture of the sound.

An excerpt from the AD (with corresponding sounds):

The stone raised on one hand goes up / Bipbip  
The heavy arm and leg upwards / uuuu  
The stability of the objects contrasts with the lightness of the body  
almost without gravity / pluf  
(change sound )  
Dark hair pulled back, thin wrists and ankles/ trill

Listen to an audio description of *Acquitrini*:

<https://soundcloud.com/diana-ciuffo/audio-descrizione-di-acquitrinicollettivo-trifoglio/s-PofJvIDRur3>

In this residency, our intervention did not disrupt the original work but was added as an additional verbal trace, which we were able to refine and adjust thanks to the feedback from blind and visually impaired audience members.

### ***The Curator's Point of View***

Flavia Dalila D'Amico

Compared to the first case, *Acquitrini* is a performance with a well-defined dance dramaturgy. Camilla Guarino proposed the same exercises as in the previous residency, but the result when listening to the voice recordings opened up a crucial question: Should the describer adopt the human point of view of the observer of the pond—thus retaining sensations, memories, perceptions, and free associations—or should they embody the environmental point of view of the pond?

It might sound like a question about descriptive neutrality again, but in reality, it is closely connected with the dramaturgy of the performance, which intentionally lets boundaries between subject and object, figure and landscape, slide in a perpetual motion. On first reflection, Camilla Guarino and Marta Bellu (the choreographer of *Acquitrini*) decided to maintain this continuous perceptual slippage between subject and object and construct a description that similarly slips between the first and third person. The idea was for the description to reflect both the performer's perceptions and the sensations emanating from the observer.

Choices of vocabulary and how to word descriptions were then added to this slippage approach. All metaphors that associate the dancer's movement with natural elements—for instance, "like a floating seaweed," "like a wave on the surface of the water"—turned out to be problematic. After the first days, when Giuseppe Comuniello entered the creative process, he posed a series of critical questions. He is not congenitally blind (born with little to no vision), so he can mentally recreate what he hears based, in part, on visual memory. How might those who are congenitally blind imagine the changing shape of a seaweed under the water? How can they imagine a mirrored sphere if they have never had the visual experience of a mirror reflection?

To address this problem, it was decided to revise the AD by replacing oculocentric terms (those that rank vision over other senses) with more tactile ones that refer to bodily sensations: for instance "the cold sphere" or "the heavy stone." With

respect to the general structure of the AD, the choice was to merge the words with the dance work's soundtrack and to thin out the narration so that it could convey the same abstraction and slowness as the performance.

Once the AD text had been sketched out, a group of blind and visually impaired people were invited to attend a rehearsal in order to test the AD. Before starting, it was decided not to reveal information about the performance.

The feedback session proved to be very important as it called into question some of the set-up choices that had been established. First of all, shifting from the first to the third person proved confusing and misleading; it distracted rather than intrigued. Among the audience was also a congenitally blind person, who showed strong perplexity about the subtle setting of the narration: "For me, as a blind learner, it is difficult to imagine while I am listening. With an interval of five minutes, I am inclined to get distracted and start the mental reconstruction of the context all over again when listening to the next words." This critique led to the decision to rethink AD as a guided meditative practice. While leaving ample nonverbal room to internalize concepts, guiding verbalization might drop in at a regular frequency to accompany different body states. This would both avoid overloading audience members with information and allow them autonomy to move and direct their attention.

During a second feedback session with the public, the choreographer proposed testing a listening practice without stage performance. The only suggestion given to the audience was to immerse themselves in the sound and verbalize their experience at the end of the event. This collective exercise led to another important discovery. Almost all of the people present, both sighted and blind, reported difficulty indulging in listening and imagining, if not frustration over an inability to anticipate and figure out the associated physical performance. Not having access to the breathing and sounds produced by the performer on stage seemed to decontextualize the soundscape for the audience. This test allowed us to understand that the soundtrack cannot work autonomously and the preferable solution is to use only one earphone, in order to retain access to the ambient noises of the performance.

The results of the two editions push us to consider that different performances require equally different access dramaturgies. The repertoire of integrated access solutions described here reflects the specific aesthetics, process, and audiences of each dance work. Instead of a set of access solutions for broad application, we

are developing methodology for how to co-design integrated access dramaturgy through exchange with blind artists and community members. Creazioni Accessibili aims to promote the idea that the incorporation of diverse embodied knowledge in art institutions is necessary for the representation of artists with disabilities in decision-making processes and for relations between presenters and their audiences. The experiences and reflections reported here are intended to convey the complexity of the research still in progress, which needs time and support to generate unpredictable paths and approaches that are sensitive to different artistic processes. This research relies on the co-design participation of blind people. Our aim is not simply to create artistic projects that match what blind audiences expect and know in our context. Rather, we hope to ensure that dance works are based on a plurality of embodied knowledge that may lead towards unexpected creative openings and multisensory connections.

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# Sighted Assumptions to Blind Imaginings: De-Centring Vision as Unexpected Dramaturgy

Alex Bulmer

I dedicate this article to my friend, the late great Disabled Lesbian playwright and activist Lina Chartrand (1948–1992).<sup>1</sup>

When, at age twenty-one, I was diagnosed with retinitis pigmentosa, I told my doctor I wanted to pursue a career in theatre. She sighed and advised that I consider the two careers available to Blind people: social work and counselling. Both are respectable professions, but I had other ambitions. When I went for a follow-up eye appointment, I sat in the waiting room reading Shakespeare monologues in preparation for upcoming auditions for the National Theatre School of Canada, the Vancouver Playhouse, and TMU (then Ryerson) Theatre School. My doctor arrived and, without warning, pulled the book from my hand. Her next words were: “Nobody wants to see a Blind woman tripping across the stage.”

She clearly had no imagination beyond the assumed. And me? I am pretty certain I had no ability to imagine beyond my known sighted reality.

I recall that, for a brief moment, I imagined myself tripping forward, seeing a stage floor, making a full recovery, and likely turning it into a Lucille Ball moment. Didn't she make a career out of tripping? I am absolutely certain that I was not able to actually imagine blind.

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<sup>1</sup> Footnote: As my article speaks to the need for history within Disabled-led theatre, I make this dedication and encourage others to consider honouring Disabled artists from the past. Many created work of influence and were often ignored or perceived as “lesser.” These artists must be remembered.

I was able, however, to ignore my doctor and move on to have a thirty-five-year career as a voice teacher, playwright, actor, screenwriter, and dramaturg.

Within this article, I will be reflecting upon past and current work, asking questions, and exploring themes of imagination, embodiment, disruption, discovery, interdependence, and blindness, and the opportunities gifted when performance de-centres vision from imagination to creation.

My practice has evolved and has been informed by Disabled Artists in Canada and the UK.<sup>2</sup> In 2004, after thirteen years of professional practice in Canada, I was awarded a highly skilled migrant visa from the UK government. The visa invited me to live and work across the pond with a commitment to develop disability arts in the United Kingdom.

At that time, my sight had deteriorated and my ability to continue working well in Canada was under threat. Although I advocated where I could for access or support, the word *access* was mostly unfamiliar, and resources for support were very limited. The UK, in contrast, at that time, offered working Disabled people a government-funded access program, called Access to Work, which covers the costs of travel to work, support workers, interpreters, or equipment needs within any kind of employment. This program still exists in the UK but is under threat by the current Labour government. I have spoken with members of provincial and federal parliament in Canada about bringing such a game-changing program into our political discourse. It concerns me that without a full government commitment to fund access solutions (especially human resource-based ones such as ASL interpreters, sighted guides, and audio describers), our arts community runs the risk of only involving those with typical or “affordable” needs.

My time in England ran from 2004 to 2017 and exposed me to a whole wide world of Disabled-led theatre. My return to Canada has included meaningful and positive experiences, and often frustrating barriers. But, at age fifty-eight, I continue to seek a cultural appreciation for human vulnerability, a trashing of the body beautiful, an intolerance to “cripping up” casting, a

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<sup>2</sup> Footnote: In particular, Maria O’Shodi from Extant Theatre, Jenny Sealey from Graeae Theatre, Jess Thom from Tourettes Hero, Lina Chartrand, Amy Amantea from Vocal Eye, Karina Jones and Jack Thorne.

genuine commitment from venues to give audiences access to their local theatre, and within a scholarly context, an examination that the academic environment drives scholars to claim ideas, where the artistic sensibility is to share them. Those who continue to share drive the fact that there is a public history to our work.

Recognizing our history brings context and foundation to our present: We are not a flash in time, not born yesterday, and not going away.

I will, therefore, begin with a step back in my time, to explore a few significant experiences that shaped and developed my dramaturgical practice, bringing me to my current thinking.

## **How Teaching Voice Informed My Understanding of Dramaturgy**

In 2004, I was asked to lead a voice workshop with Graeae, the UK's flagship Disabled-led theatre company. Without a doubt, the company's success and accomplishment are intrinsically linked to the access-to-work program. The workshop focused on voice for three actors who had particular vocal "impairments." Two identified as Disabled with cerebral palsy, and one as surviving a military accident leading to severe brain damage. I faced my first challenge, which was around language to define their unique vocality. I was not comfortable with the familiar terminology "speech impediment" or "speech impairment." It was negative and ableist. Together, with the participants, we coined the term "differing speech pattern," which set the exciting, disruptive, and enabling tone for the entire workshop. As a voice teacher, I had been trained with the expectation that all actors needed to develop physical control of their body and the ability to manipulate the tongue, rib cage, soft palate, and jaw, all toward having the "healthy, free, natural voice." These participants shook, wobbled, dribbled, and spoke out with unruly tongues. Did this mean they were disqualified from performance, from being an actor? NO. But this question at that time gave me pause to seriously think deeply about the meaning of voice in performance, and the intention of theatre. One word focused me: *communicate*.

So, my three participants with differing speech patterns and I learned how to adapt and reimagine voice, within their unique physical instruments, their unique composition of imagination, body, and breath. I became acutely aware that an actor's voice develops through a collaboration between established practice and body diversity, ultimately resulting in authentic expression. This collaborative methodology went beyond voice and illuminated how bodies can innovate and shape dramaturgical practice. Each participant prepared a short solo performance, using a monologue as the starting point. We created practitioner-led dramaturgies, considering the communication abilities of the actor, and the demands and opportunities of a text. One actor had significant difficulty with the speech movements for the word "rain." We therefore put **RAIN** (and other key words) onto a screen with creative fonts and graphic design. The words first appeared at the top, and as the actor performed, the letters trickled down—each letter rained. Further use of screen imagery and sound design, in collaboration with physical and vocal ability, shaped each performance. Dramaturgy emerged through an awareness of voice and body, revealing how deep embodiment of practice is a foundation for authentic expression—for original theatre.

## ***Blasted*: How Stage Directions Evolved Blind Dramaturgy**

While working with Graeae Theatre and London Metropolitan University in 2005, I was asked to direct a recorded reading of plays, including Sarah Kane's *Blasted*. These play texts were on the syllabus of a unique course, which delivered practical and academic study for Disabled students seeking a profession in theatre.

University libraries offered nearly no plays in a format accessible for Blind students at the time.<sup>3</sup>

*Blasted* was a relevant text. Kane's work is often aligned with the plays by Bertolt Brecht: cynical, anti-bourgeois, with a glorification of the social outsider.

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<sup>3</sup> Footnote: In Canada this has now changed, but you have to be registered with accessibility services to access the play texts, and it is syllabus based versus interest based, so you must present a course syllabus to access texts.

The play was chosen for its relevance to disability politics, as well as being an essential text within academic study of contemporary English drama.

The recording was initially intended as an accessibility solution.

At the start of the *Blasted* reading, I asked the actors to speak their characters' stage directions as well as dialogue. Kane, in her writer's notes, referred to stage directions as "functioning as lines" and used bracketed text to indicate meaning. Neither the stage directions nor the bracketed text were intended to be spoken out loud. But I was considering access for Blind audiences, so all of Kane's text became potential dialogue. Below is a short excerpt that represents how the playwright's text appears in its original publication:

**Cate** You all right?

**Ian** It's nothing.

*He pours himself another gin, this time with ice and tonic, and sips it at a more normal pace.*

*He collects his gun and puts it in his underarm holster.*

*He smiles at **Cate**.*

**Ian** I'm glad you've come. Didn't think you would.

*(He offers her champagne.)*

**Cate** *(Shakes her head.)* I was worried.

**Ian** This? *(He indicates his chest.)* Don't matter.

**Cate** I didn't mean that. You sounded unhappy.

**Ian** *(Pops the champagne. He pours them both a glass.)*

**Cate** What we celebrating?

**Ian** *(Doesn't answer. He goes to the window and looks out.)*  
Hate this city. Stinks.

The reading revealed how active and relevant the stage directions were to the story, and their potential to give access to Blind audiences.

We discussed how the spoken stage directions added a “distancing effect,” which, for those who know their Brecht, is a well-known technique used by the German director to encourage the audience to be less empathetic and more a distanced observer. I’ll note the irony that speaking stage directions might distance some and give others access.

A year later, I was invited by Graeae artistic director Jenny Sealey to adapt the text using stage directions within dialogue and to dramaturg a new production of *Blasted*. The process was fascinating. Using existing stage directions was both an opportunity for access as well as a dramaturgical technique to lean into the Brechtian style of the play. It offered an artful step beyond description with the sole intention of accessibility. A dramaturgical choice was made to give each character a precise and first-person articulation of action, avoiding pronouns as and where possible so as not to put the characters into a third person with their actions.

Below is an excerpt from the adapted text, using the same scene as above:

**Cate** You all right?

**Ian** It’s nothing. Pours another gin. Sips. Collects his gun.

**Ian** I’m glad you’ve come. Didn’t think you would. Offers champagne.

**Cate** Shakes her head. I was worried.

**Ian** This? Indicates his chest. Don’t matter.

**Cate** I didn’t mean that. You sounded unhappy.

**Ian** Pops champagne.

**Cate** What we celebrating?

Ian Doesn't answer. Goes to the window. Looks. Hate this city.  
Stinks.

Our decision to adapt the script in this way impacted the full production, including its design. The design included no actual props or objects handled by the actors. The set was bare aside from a bed and a vase of flowers. A large screen appeared as a news feed featuring Deaf actors in character costumes, delivering sign language.

There were no glasses to drink from, no bottle of Gin, no gun, or strips of bacon. Instead, the actors made minimal gestures and relied only on words to bring material objects into the imagination of the audience. Whether sighted or Blind, we shared a similar engagement with the production. Integrating stage directions or character action within dialogue was not groundbreaking. Artists including Lynne Manning in the USA and Maria O'Shodi in the UK had been exploring Blind-led dramaturgy and accessibility within their work. I reflect upon *Blasted* as my deep dive and inauguration into this practice, finding intentionality within accessibility choices that co-exist with elements of theme and design.

I'm forever reminded that this widely acclaimed production, and its significance to my evolving practice, came about due to the presence and needs of a Blind student who demanded their university imagine them as nonvisual "readers."

The production inspired me to design a new work and new writing program with Graeae to support Disabled-led plays and to encourage Deaf and Disabled theatre artists to consider access within the writing and play development process.

## **How Blind Children Taught Me the Importance of Imagination and Tactility**

In 2014, I was commissioned by Yorkville Playhouse and Polka Theatre to write for a Theatre in Education (TIE) series. It was an opportunity to write multiple characters and focus on sound and voice, as the pieces needed to be performed by classrooms—thirty-something students, with hardly any set, no

lighting, and minimal costumes. My starting point was to creatively think about sound—the sound of a piano, and an invisible rock band. I wanted to write from the perspective of a Blind child. I asked myself what superpower I would have if I was eight years old and couldn't see. The answer: to have portable ears. I used a storytelling structure to integrate description into the text. Although there were only a few Blind children involved out of approximately 120 kids, it was important for me to commit to and continue to develop Blind dramaturgy.

The TIE project went well. I sought and was awarded funding to develop the play with schools for Blind children across England, to create a production developed with input from the young Blind community.

With my creative team, part of a new company I co-founded called Invisible Flash, we learned to better understand the relationship between imagination and tactility. For example, to enact the seaside, one student poured water into a glass and put the glass on top of their head. To enact flying, a group took hold of a small parachute and flapped it in the air, providing stable tactility, meaningful sound, and the perception of wind.

We read sections of the play to give the students an understanding of the story and invited all to create props for the future touring production.

This was both to provide a deeper sense of participation and to create an access initiative.

When a young person's object, or an object made by their school, emerged during the production, the audience cheered and erupted with "we made that!"

I directed the actors to move through the audience, enabling touch at various times within the performance—a kind of in-the-moment "touch tour."

Prior to the start of the play, we referred to the set as a tactile playground and invited all Blind children to "play" on the set with actors in costume supporting them. It set a tone of belonging rather than being served. I can't stress enough the impact and distinction between these two intentions.

Giving young people the idea that a creative future—a life in theatre—can be a Blind ambition remains a priority in my current practice. The performing arts are too frequently waived off as an option for this community. International work is being done to address this by companies including the UK's Extant Theatre and Croatia's Novi Zivot.

Informing dramaturgy with tactility had previously eluded me. I was unable to make solid dramaturgical sense of it. Working with these Blind children opened my mind; a theatrical potential emerged through nonvisual and unexpected imagery. The tactility of a kitchen sieve over an actor's face is, for a Blind child, a long, single-toothed sewer creature (called a Ratwell in the play); a soft hair brush across an arm is blowing sand. The mention of a made object is remembered in the hands of the Blind maker and thus ignites deeper sensory connection. Visuality is so dominant in culture and dramaturgies. This work rooted its process and practice in the other senses, which I propose reflects a radical cultural dramaturgy: Blind dramaturgy.

## **Blind Imaginings: A Thought Breakthrough, a Workshop, and an Unexpected Practice**

My move from Canada to the UK ignited a long-standing curiosity about Blindness and travel. I had earned funding to answer the question "What is it like to travel Blind?" Little did I know how this question would unlock a whole new approach to art making and performance. But it did, following a failed attempt to travel in the footsteps of a nineteenth-century Blind traveller named James Holman. I had chosen to pursue my question as a twenty-first-century traveller, revisiting the route travelled by Holman two hundred years earlier. Why take such a historical approach to this question? Partly to impress the funders. Partly because I hadn't gone deeply enough to embody the question or imagine it.

I set off in Holman's footsteps to travel and become a Blind travel writer. The plan was to journey through Germany, Italy, and France over a period of five weeks. After two weeks of travel, I was profoundly disoriented, freaked out, and gave up. The failure hurt. So much so that I confined myself to a rented Airbnb, away from my usual life, and did nothing other than make muffins and

write. One morning, after eating a pumpkin muffin, I sat on a sofa and wrote the following:

What was I thinking?

How could I have imagined that I could possibly travel through eight cities in less than two weeks, while blind, in a country I'd never been to before?

I listened back to the question using my screen reader.

And realized the answer was in the question.

But the question was not, how could I have imagined? but, how did I imagine?

I was imagining with my sighted brain—imagining what travelling to new cities and places would look like, imagining places in pictures, with shapes and faces and colours.

This thought amazed me. I'd moved away from seeing years earlier, but my imagination never left home. My imagination was stuck in my sighted past.

I wrote two more words, *Blind Imagining*, and I started to practise imagining travel through my ears and feet. It started with just a half hour, imagining outside sounds and textures prior to leaving my apartment.

This idea was the artistic earthquake I needed, de-centring vision from my mind. It launched a workshop and a series of performance projects including *May I Take Your Arm* and *Perceptual Archaeology (or How to Travel Blind)*.

Imagining Blind led to the creation of Blind Imaginings—a workshop that first took place in 2018, co-led by myself, Jessica Watkin, Michael Achtman, and Tristan Whiston. All four collaborators had been exploring blindness and performance as theatre artists, bringing skills and expertise in dramaturgy, playwrighting, integrated and traditional audio description, and embodied awareness. Participants in the workshop included Blind and sighted theatre and circus practitioners. We explored how de-centring vision from our practice could open new pathways for creativity. To prepare participants to truly embody this exploration, a series of exercises encouraged movement

and spatial understanding through engagement with the senses of touch, hearing, smell, and taste. These invitations ultimately invited participants to understand a nonvisual dramaturgy—composition that de-centred sight and redirected to foreground the body mind.

Many participants have gone forward to incorporate Blind Imaginings into their work. Playwrights Yolanda Bonnell and Natasha Greenblatt made a bold choice to integrate description into their final draft of a new play, *The Election*. With myself and director Jennifer Brewin, *The Election* brought integrated description to the stage of Theatre Passe Muraille in 2019.

Blind Imaginings is now something I deliver both live and over Zoom, to artists and students, including those at the National Theatre School of Canada.

*May I Take Your Arm* emerged when I moved into an unfamiliar Toronto neighbourhood in the St. Jamestown area. Knowing nothing of my surroundings, I asked, “How do I turn space into place into home?” It was not enough to simply trace a tactile map of roads and crossings. I wanted to understand the meaning held by buildings and routes, as told by those who call it home. My desire to understand my surroundings provided a dramaturgical inquiry for this performance.

Community arts company ReDefine Arts (formerly Red Dress Productions) joined me to curate a diverse team of walkers who I’d not met.

We walked, and together, I learned space and turned it into place through shared walking, and through an exchange of memories and stories.

The walks were recorded and formed the dramaturgical foundation and structure for a new interdisciplinary performance.

The performance was imagined to be a multisensory experience, for me and for the audience. I wanted to perform listening as my central action, rather than speaking. My primary gesture throughout the performance was touch—the set included small miniature landscapes (designed and created by multidisciplinary artist Anna Camilleri) with people and buildings representing the actual neighbourhood I’d explored with sighted resident guides. The

production gave me the rare opportunity to perform with my ears, my hands, and my feet.

*Perceptual Archaeology (or How to Travel Blind)* is a play text that evolved from my travel writing.

The writing became a theatre project, developed over three years, that brought together so many of the lessons and learnings referred to within this article. It was directed by physical theatre artist Leah Cherniak, and produced by Laura Phillips as a co-production with Crows Theatre in Toronto. My access needs informed the aesthetics of the work.

The design elements involved repeated discussions around aesthetics and accessibility, especially set and costume designs. These discussions explored how tactile flooring, sensory-abled footwear, strategically placed furniture, and small hand-felt tactility on the set could enable my orientation and direction while performing.

Sound was a big part of the development process. The piece initially explored the use of binaural recordings and both bone-conductive and regular headphones. However, we concluded during a sound workshop that the binaural experience pushed the play too far toward seeming to simulate blindness, which I didn't want.

The binaural listening experience overwhelmed the story and potentially compromised my performance—it seemed earnest in tone while I wanted a playful, unpredictable energy. We therefore decided against headphones or binaural technology. This moment allowed the dramaturgy of the piece to inform the design.

The choice to hold a microphone to amplify my voice raised questions around aesthetics and access. We did not want my voice to be second to or below the designed soundscapes. This presented a tracking barrier for Blind audiences. We invested in technology designed to shift sound directionally and in sync with my movement; but for reasons of technology and space limitations, this solution was not as successful as we had wanted.

I worked with an onstage line feeder and space describer who spoke through a microphone into my ear. This liberated me from feeling anxious about lines or disoriented in front of an audience. My line feeder, Enzo Campo, also occasionally added live descriptions for the audience. He gradually and playfully became more and more of a second character within the play. Why is this dramaturgically significant? We were playing with the dynamic of support workers sometimes getting bored or enthused and taking over. This is another example of how access informed the dramaturgy of the piece: Enzo as line feeder was also integrated into the script and overall presence of the play.

As the rehearsal room was mostly populated by sighted artists, it was essential to have Blind dramaturge Dr. Jessica Watkin in the room. Although I had written the script with a Blind audience in mind, the play's developing physicality and evolving design needed expertise from a nonvisual perspective. Dramaturgical choices needed to prioritize audiences with no visual perception. This did not mean a lack of visuality or visual aesthetics, but it did ask that seeing be secondary to listening.

The script called on all audiences to use their imagination.

A ladder became a hill, through my saying so. A chest became a bed, which became a hill because I said so. And, when I needed help to find my way to a particular object or location, I asked the audience to guide me by yelling a "boo" or "yeah" according to how close I was to the desired target. It was an opportunity to create a fun interdependence with the audience, similar to the "hot" and "cold" game.

## **Fire and Rescue: De-centring Vision from Imagination to Creation**

The practice of Blind imagining, and the energy created through several workshops, led to the birth of a new collective.

In 2020, together with Leah Cherniak and Laura Phillips, I co-founded Fire and Rescue. We are evolving and now include artistic associates Ophira Calof, Dr. Jessica Watkin, Dr. Becky Gold, Dr. Kelsey Acton, Lorna Craig, and Ingrid Palmer.

We are an inter-abled team, prioritizing de-centring visuality from imagination to creation, with shared values of interdependence, collective creation, and passion for reimagined excellence informed and infused by disability.

Our major accomplishment to date is the 2023 Dora-nominated co-production with Crow's Theatre *Perceptual Archaeology (or How to Travel Blind)*.

Currently, we are collaborating with the W. Ross MacDonald School for Blind students to find new stories and imaginings by Blind children, for a future Blind-led digital art space.

We are engaged in a new initiative called "Theatre for the Ears.

This is a Blind-led play development project featuring Blind writers culminating in a first draft and Disabled-led public reading. During our first set of workshops—a rare gathering of all blind artists—there was a strong sense of connection and shared experience, and exciting exchange while each developed a distinctive dramatic voice.

It's been thirty-four years of disrupting assumptions and discovering blindness and Blind imagination. All has shaped my art and my life and opened creative doors and relationships. I'll conclude with a thought first offered to me by Laura Phillips, as it articulates an excellent guiding principle that I hope will remain with me through the future. In her words, Laura proposes that we best flourish when we work at the speed of trust. So clear and so valuable—to remember to give time to acknowledge each other and honour the place we hold in each other's lives.

# **Rigorous Dreaming: Curatorial Practices for Large-Scale Disability Performance**

By Shay Erlich and Sarah Conn

**SARAH:**

My name is Sarah Conn.

**SHAY:**

And my name is Shay Erlich. We will be reading the article together.

**SARAH:**

We believe in the power of dreaming. More specifically, we love those wild, unwieldy, how-on-earth-will-this-happen dreams that flutter around the edges of artists' hearts and minds. It is so tender to dream, so vulnerable in this moment of polycrisis. Yet these dreams spark cultural change, invite audiences to fall in love with performance and with each other, and send ripples through communities. These are not casual dreams for the faint of heart, but ferocious beings often fuelled by a mix of courage, useful naivety, and—for some of us at least—a healthy dose of existential terror. We can't afford to lose these big dreams. Given the stakes of dreaming, let's ask: Who is allowed to dream big? What are the conditions necessary to dream big?

**SHAY:**

After decades of advocacy and labour, disabled performance is flourishing across Canada. However, it is still rare for disabled performances to be presented on larger stages and for the work to be created with the same resources as nondisabled-led performances in Canada, which limits the scale of the work that is possible. This gap is caused by systemic barriers and reinforced by the overall absence of disability-driven curatorial practice in

major performing arts presenting institutions. How can disabled artists dream big if they don't have access to larger mainstream presentation spaces as either audience members or artists?

**SARAH:**

There is more at stake in addressing this gap than inequity. While there is much that smaller scale performance can do to drive accessibility practices forward and utilize the power of live work toward disability storytelling and community goals, the impact of creating large-scale work is far-reaching. Dreaming and creating on a large scale allows the work to reach new audiences, open expansive aesthetic and expressive capacities, nurture rich artistic development, increase visibility and the opportunity for recognition, strengthen networks through national and international partnership opportunities, resist scarcity models, develop conditions for financial sustainability, create opportunity for career advancement, and build an artistic practice that spans across global contexts.

**SHAY:**

Under the best conditions, large-scale disabled performance offers the capacity to influence the broader sphere of disability arts culture as well as nondisabled performance. For example, Britain's Drag Syndrome—a collective of drag artists with Down Syndrome who have been creating, performing, and touring work since 2018—has successfully sparked broader public conversations about the inclusion of disabled people in the arts and LGBTQ+ folks with developmental disabilities (see Drag Syndrome, n.d.). The impacts of their work have rippled globally, including in Canadian contemporary performances such as the National accessArts Centre's *ICONIC+* (see *ICONIC+ 2025*; and Ranaldi 2019). Large-scale performances are artistic and community legacies that are felt long after a tour or production has wrapped.

**SARAH:**

For all these reasons and more, the National Arts Centre's National Creation Fund is dedicated to supporting the creation of large-scale work. And so, as two of the Creation Fund's curators, we view the lack of disability performance at scale with some urgency. We firmly believe that our investments—and the work on stages—must reflect the diversity of Canada, and that includes disabled artists. This gap is an opportunity to reimagine who creates work of scale and to challenge understandings of the

performances and conventions that belong on large stages. As a practice of care, contextualization, and relationship, curation is critically positioned to lead this reimagining, but this potential will only be met if the practice evolves. In addition to better resourcing disabled artists, we need curatorial practices that are intentionally designed for the thriving of bold, large-scale, disability-centred performances on national and international stages. Asking big questions about the relationship between dreaming, disability, and scale has allowed us to identify some starting places to shape an emergent curatorial practice that approaches access as both ethic and aesthetic, disrupting the structures that typically surround performance practice.

## **The National Creation Fund's Curatorial Framework**

At the 2016 launch of the National Creation Fund, the late Peter A. Herrndorf, former president and CEO of the NAC, spoke to the initial inspiration: "We want to change the ecosystem of creation in this country so that performing artists can create new work that achieves its potential, resonates with audiences, and can be presented widely beyond its premiere. We want to help our performing artists create brilliant new work that will triumph on the national and international stage." Since then, we have made over one hundred transformative investments in the creation of bold new music, dance, theatre, and interdisciplinary performances, infusing more than \$14.8 million into Canadian performing arts. We are an incubator devoted to developing the conditions, both financial and otherwise, that are necessary to create incredible work. When artists are stretching within their practice, and experimenting with new scales and modes of creation, a holistic approach to support is required. Non-financial conditions that support the development of such work include a well-curated creative team, thoughtful collaborative practices and creative process design, rigorous producing strategies (not least of all, the hiring of a producer), access to specialized expertise, well-aligned partnerships, the participation of outside eyes and work-in-progress audiences, and an understanding of the broader cultural context. Our research into the conditions for great work is ongoing, and it is informed and guided by the many wonderful artists the National Creation Fund has had the privilege of supporting. Our bespoke investment practices are how we put this research into practice, in collaboration with the artists we support. At the centre of our work is a conviction in the power of creation as a means of evolving culture, sparking innovation, and shaping our world.

**SHAY:**

We make investment decisions through a two-phase curatorial process led by Sarah, in her role as the Creation Fund's artistic producer. Artists first submit an expression of interest, which is reviewed by a curatorial team assembled in response to the disciplines, social contexts, and cultures of the proposed project. Each curatorial team includes members of the NAC's artistic leadership, as well as external curators from across the country.<sup>1</sup> We look for projects that are led by Canadian creators, that have a strong artistic team, committed producing and presenting partners, and that have the potential for meaningful long-term national and international impact, including through touring. We look for work that is unique: art that propels culture forward and that challenges what Canadian society collectively imagines as possible.

**SARAH:**

In our work, we understand curation as a process-based practice that weaves connective tissue between what artist and curator Paul O'Neill called a "constellation of creative ideas," the audience, and the contexts, including geographic and cultural (2016, 1). While curation is often understood as part of presenting rather than investment or funding, we are convinced that its relational structure has much to offer these fields (see Conn 2023). Ultimately, this practice allows the Creation Fund to curate seasons of artistic creation: a series of bold and ambitious experiments across the country featuring courageous artists taking big risks in search of the alchemy of artistic creation.

**SHAY:**

These experiments can take many forms. For example, *Artistic Fraud's I Forgive You* tells the true story of a homophobic attack that left co-writer and performer Scott Jones paralyzed from the waist down (see *I Forgive You* 2023). The attack received international attention, both due to its brutality and Scott's decision to forgive the attacker. During the performance, Scott is onstage with his back to the audience as he directs a live children's choir while two actors tell his story. At the end, Scott turns to the audience for the

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<sup>1</sup> Footnote: A full list of our current curatorial team can be found on our website: <https://nac-cna.ca/en/creationfund/about>.

first time and speaks unscripted as to whether he—in that exact moment—forgives his attacker. The performance is a raw and vulnerable experiment in the deep complexities of forgiveness, held gracefully within a formal experiment into the intersection of theatre and choral performance. The latter experiment is driven by Scott’s real-life work as a choir director. Each layer of experimentation is carefully rooted in Scott’s lived experience and present-day needs as a human and artist.

**SARAH:**

We also supported Sick + Twisted Theatre’s *Antigone*, developed in partnership with AA Battery and The Mariachi Ghost (see *Antigone* 2022). Created and performed by an integrated cast of Deaf, disabled, and nondisabled artists, the production reimaged Anne Carson’s translation of Sophocles’ tragedy. Following a run in Winnipeg, the production conducted a digital tour, an experiment in new ways of touring disabled-led work to ensure greater access for both artists and audiences, and to imagine more sustainable touring practices. In *Antigone*, access was a core artistic principle, driving key artistic choices, including the types of materials used in the set, and the performance styles through the casting of a Deaf performer in the lead role.

**SHAY:**

During our first few years of operation, we identified several gaps in who was applying to the Creation Fund. Notably, we were receiving few submissions from disabled artists, and even fewer submissions from disabled artists proposing work at scale. Seeking to understand and address this absence, we engaged Shay as an accessibility consultant. We are now in the third year of our collaboration, which is dedicated to infusing understandings of accessibility and disability in all aspects of the Creation Fund’s work, including our curatorial practices.

**SARAH:**

Guided by the belief that accessibility is a creative practice that makes performance better for everyone, we are developing an emergent and ever-evolving curatorial approach for large-scale work by disabled artists in relationship with a team of disabled curators, including Syrus Marcus Ware and Erin Clark. The approach manifests through four key facets that are

designed to centre disability knowledge-generating practices and offer imaginative space for disabled artists to dream bigger about their artistic and production practices.

**SHAY:**

### **Facet 1: Disability-Informed Curatorial Critique is Actually Sense-Making**

As we began our work together, we asked ourselves: How do we execute curatorial decision-making in a way that meets disability performance where it is at? Recognizing that disabled artists may not always be offered the respect of informed critique, how can our curatorial response be a generative community-building contribution? And how can we do that in consideration of the complex ways disability performance often challenges Western-colonial performance aesthetics?

At the heart of our curatorial approach is an understanding of the need for intentional critique—whether aesthetic, dramaturgical, or ethical—that goes beyond simplistic attempts to define what “good” disability performance is. In addition to requests for the usual budget, timeline, and support material, the second phase of our submission process features a series of questions, including how the creative team will approach collaborating together, what the decision-making process is, and what their producing approach and strategies are. Inspired by our conversations with Dr. Kelsie Acton about her research on accessibility in dance (see Acton 2021), we talk about how creative decisions will be made, and what processes are in place to manage disagreements. In short, we seek to understand not only the ambition of the artistic vision and its feasibility, but also the ambitions of the relationships that are in place to sustain the artistic vision.

This approach of curatorial curiosity, a practice that blurs the line between dramaturgy and curation, supports us in making sense of the responses and information we’re receiving from the artists. The exchanges form a critical container in which we can truly meet the artist, their work, and their intended audience. We move carefully into the inside of the work and witness the dynamics birthing it. The conversations that drive our decisions are not about whether a specific proposal is good or bad, or innovative on a scale of 1 to 5. We don’t use matrices or rubrics, and we don’t have deadlines, so we don’t have cohorts of proposals to discuss comparatively. We look at each

proposal on its own merit, and forefront the artists' ambitions for the project and our analysis of whether we are the best ones to meet them. Our curatorial decisions are based on how we collectively understand and make sense of the proposed work. Therefore, we practise curation as a relational sense-making system that is necessarily responsive to the needs of all who interact with it.

**SARAH:**

## **Facet 2: There Is a Difference Between Rigour and Aesthetics**

Our curatorial approach is driven by the understanding that it is essential to differentiate between rigour and Western-colonial definitions of professional aesthetics. Disability aesthetics often directly contradict Western-colonial aesthetics, while being equally rigorous.

There is no singular disability aesthetic, but rather a multiplicity of flourishing aesthetics that respond to the needs, fascinations, and desires of disabled artists and audiences. Disability studies scholar Tobin Siebers offers a definition of disability aesthetics as "a critical concept that seeks to emphasize the presence of disability in the tradition of aesthetic representation" and refuses to see the abled body and its visual manifestation as the definition of aesthetic value (2006). Disabled dramaturg and teacher Madeline Charne pushes this further, noting, "The field of disability aesthetics embraces the beauty in that which seems (by traditional, ableist standards) to be broken and considers those things more, not less, beautiful as a result of that 'brokenness'" (2019). Differentiating between rigour and aesthetics allows disability-informed definitions to converge within the discipline and be perceived. It empowers disabled artists to lean into the grotesque and away from sanitized narratives of disability that are often preferred in mainstream disability representation. Therefore, at the Creation Fund, we have begun to intentionally develop ways to talk about qualities of disability art without imposing an aesthetic.

A key part of this conversation is acknowledging access as aesthetic. Within disability performance, access and aesthetics are inseparable. One of the primary ways disabled aesthetics manifest is through the design of access features and forms that include and centre the needs of disabled artists, cultural workers, and audiences in intentional ways. Disabled choreographer

and dancer Alice Sheppard offers her perspective: “We’re thinking about access as an ethic, as an aesthetic, as a practice, as a promise, as a relationship with the audience” (Fuhrer 2022). Similarly, in our early conversations, Debbie Patterson, artistic director of Sick + Twisted Theatre, shared that their creative process for *Antigone* would weave access into the aesthetic of the performance, so that it would not only avoid compromising the aesthetic excellence of the work but it would also actually enhance it. Debbie wrote to Sarah:

By using the disruptions our disabilities provide as opportunities rather than obstacles, we counter these harmful narratives and create a vision of a new way to live extravagantly in the flawed and imperfect bodies we all inhabit. We give our audience the opportunity to glimpse the liberation that’s possible when we stop assessing our worth based on our productivity or our proximity to perfection (Patterson 2022).

The perspective of access as aesthetic impacts how we analyze the access features offered in proposals as both aesthetic and practical propositions, and how we understand the emphasis on access within creative descriptions often seen in submissions from disabled artists.

**SHAY:**

### **Facet 3: We Operate from a Disability-Informed Definition of Rigour**

Historically, disability-led performance art has not been considered using a disability-informed definition of rigour. Even within contemporary presentations of disability art, critique often consists of questioning if there is something of value gained by witnessing disabled bodies, stories or ways of working on a stage, and the access measures required for them to participate in theatre. There is often an unstated expectation that disabled artists and disability arts productions ought to strive to look as close to mainstream theatre productions as possible, and make access features as unobtrusive, small, and quiet as possible in order to maintain traditional theatre conventions; and that while it may be okay to make performances that address disability themes, doing so as a disabled person, who appears disabled and works outside of conventional ways of doing, ought to be avoided at all costs.

Therefore, we began developing a disability-informed definition of rigour. Our definition resists the historical understandings of rigour, in which the word became synonymous with colonial understandings of discipline, intolerance, harshness, and punishment. We excavated what we see as the core of rigour—relationship and consideration—and placed it within understandings of disability justice. We decided to view rigour as a curatorial understanding of how process, people—including artists, the audience, and the broader community—aesthetics, and access intersect in the resulting performance. Here, rigour is evidence of consideration for each element and how they intersect with the work. In this way, rigour becomes a process which continues to be active and intentional as artists present their work to new audiences. As a relational practice, this sense-making should ideally be done in partnership with the communities that are represented and impacted within the work.

The following are a few places we search for rigour when curatorially engaging with a work.

### ***Internal Consistency***

Are the aims of the performance operationalized in every aspect of its process and presentation? Can we see evidence of this throughout the schedule, working practices, creative considerations, budget, and choice of team? For example, one of the central elements that the Creation Fund's investment facilitated for Sick + Twisted Theatre was extra time beyond the standard theatre production timeline to account for the extra work needed to harmonize the various needs of multiple disabled performers and access measures. Other internal consistency issues within a production could include ensuring multiple marginalized disabled people are prioritized as artists, production staff, and audiences, budget allocations for access, the choice of a performance format that matches the access measures selected, and the correlation of scope and resources in which the design of a timeline and team matches the ambitions of the project. We hope to see this consistency throughout the application and all conversations with the artistic team, to ensure that the team has clarity not only about their goals but also about the time, financial, human, and knowledge resources necessary to accomplish them.

## ***Audience Relationship***

Do the artists share an understanding of who the audience for their work is? Is this audience and the support (artistic or otherwise) that they might need being considered in the creation of the performance? The answers to these questions were quite clear with Sick + Twisted Theatre, who were actively seeking to attract both disabled and nondisabled audience members. With a Deaf artist in a lead role, utilizing Visual Vernacular (a sign language that has been adapted to be legible to nonfluent signers), there was significant thought put into how everyone in the audience would experience the performance. We also look for space for learning and reworking, based on an understanding that each presentation is a resting place, and an opportunity to place the work in conversation with its audience.

One of our ongoing conversations is how visible the artist's intentions for a work should be to an audience. If we embrace a dramaturgically driven definition of rigour as a curatorial understanding of how different elements come together in the performance, how conscious does the audience need to be of that understanding? Does the audience need to be equipped with resources so they feel prepared to venture into the work? And what might those resources look like or contain? Especially when engaging with aesthetics we might not have encountered before, it's easy to argue that a rigorous performance is one where the audience feels well prepared and understands the parameters in which the work is operating. Yet a performance where the aims of the piece are explicit and we're well resourced to find our way through can be, well, boring.

We continue to be interested in the relationship between rigour and mystery, and rigour and agency. Can rigour not necessarily equate to work that is more legible, but still be felt by those who engage with the piece? Could it be an experience of reciprocal and individual sense-making, in which the audience feels agency to make their own sense of it, and find their own way through it? Is it possible for any piece to address the full multiplicity of experiences and identities that may witness a performance and the unique sense-making filter each individual brings to the work?

**SARAH:**

***Artistic Intentionality***

Similarly, artistic rigour is about intentionality. Are creative decisions being made toward a core creative vision or investigation? Is everyone on the team clear about the core vision, and is that reflected in all elements of development? Is the creative process being designed to offer the depth, thoroughness, and robustness that the artistic vision requires? Have the ideas been tested and refined, or is this a first draft? We look for a sense that the artistic process is rooted in the richness of the artists' practices, and this is a piece that could only be created by these particular artists together.

**SHAY:**

***Rigour of Critique***

We also apply our understanding of rigour to ourselves and our curatorial practice, reflecting on how each of the elements we bring to a curatorial review intersect with the proposed project. We set boundaries on what should or shouldn't be fair game in critical conversations about disabled performance. For example, we look at functional accessibility as exactly that—functional: A performance with hearing ASL interpreters interpreting on the side stage is a functional adaptation of a performance to allow Deaf patrons to access the text, rather than the creative and artistic embodiment that a Deaf shadow cast would bring to a performance. Therefore, we don't include elements of functional accessibility in our creative conversations about a performance. Too often, critical analysis of accessible performance focuses on the presence of access features, viewing them as distractions or cool tools. This interpretation is particularly problematic when these features are not the tools the person offering the analysis uses to access the work, and so they cannot truly comment on their effectiveness for their target audience. This example highlights the importance of institutions engaging directly with the disability community in curatorial conversations, decision-making, and planning to ensure that those who can comment on their effectiveness as artistic and functional tools are considered within the curatorial process.

**SARAH:**

#### **Facet 4: Accessibility Is a Creative Practice That Is Everyone's Responsibility**

One of our first learnings together was that in addition to being intentional in our curatorial approach for disabled artists, there is significant value in using the same approach as a framework for nondisabled artists as well. Put simply, a critical way to increase the number of disabled artists working at scale is to ensure that disabled artists have access to large-scale performance as audience members and as members of creative teams. To encourage the creation of more accessible large-scale performances, we decided that accessibility and disability should be key lenses in all our decision-making, regardless of whether a proposal involved a disabled artist or not.

Here's what that looks like. We make decisions through a two-phase submission process with a low-barrier entry point that allows us to deepen our relationship with the artist and our understanding of their work and practice over time. We offer application assistance, including financial support to pay someone to help with the submission in whatever language the artist feels comfortable to best represent their project. Our initial proposal form invites all artists to consider accessibility in both their creation process and final production and to send us any questions they may have about incorporating accessibility.

For clarity, we interpret accessibility broadly to include all barriers people may face when accessing performance. We centre disability needs but are also mindful of broader access needs, including financial, geographic, linguistic, aesthetic, and relational access. Disabled people often face barriers to employment on creative teams and frequently cannot attend productions due to access barriers. When attendance is possible, there is often little attention paid to the quality of experience offered to disabled people. Placing curatorial attention on the access equity—the equality of an experience between disabled and nondisabled people—within the creation, production, and audience experience is a way to highlight and address the immense invisibilized labour that disabled people take on to participate as audience members, artists, and cultural workers.

Having a mandatory question about accessibility for all productions was instigated through conversations with Erin Clark, one of our disabled curators, who flagged that disabled artists were at a disadvantage because they have to direct significant financial and human resources toward the access needs of themselves and their collaborators, which shortchanges their creation and production budgets. There was also a sense that disabled artists are held to a higher standard in their accessibility offerings, while nondisabled artists are often allowed to offer nothing or minimal access accommodations. Noting this unevenness, and acknowledging the inseparable loop between disabled audiences being able to access performance and disabled artists creating performances, this question is designed to be invitational and relational. Simply asking the question has revealed that most people are genuinely curious about how the accessibility standards of public performance are shifting and are open to taking up the question as an important element to consider.

We recognize that it takes time to develop an artistic relationship to accessibility, and that it is an artistic skill that we all—disabled or not—have to figure out through exploration. There is no expectation of perfection or even confidence in what a project proposes, but they do need to be engaged and curious. Ensuring performances are accessible is a shared responsibility between artists and curators, and it is critical for our entire sector. Given that estimates of disability in the western population sit around 30 percent, considering a production’s accessibility at all stages must move into regular curatorial practice (Statistics Canada 2023).

Erin’s observations also informed our decision to have disability curators participate in all our initial proposal reviews. They offer curatorial responses that draw from their lived experience as disabled artists, their intersectional identities, and their understandings of frameworks including disability justice. Currently our disabled curators include Erin Clark, Syrus Marcus Ware, and Shay. Each curator offers a rich set of expertise, resulting in thorough conversations and robust curatorial responses that destabilize curation’s traditional gatekeeping role.

**SHAY:**

## **We Have Big Questions**

The Creation Fund's specific vantage point offers a view of how various elements of the cultural ecosystem collide. After several years of implementing a curatorial practice that considers accessibility as a decision-making metric, we have started to ask questions to make sense of what we have seen and talked about. This sense-making is a direct consequence of the curation model that we use. For example:

How do disabled artists develop touring connections if venues aren't equipped to present their work, and showcase opportunities often bring the work to curators and presenters who aren't equipped to make sense of the work?

**SARAH:**

Who has access to creative teams with the knowledge, skills, and experience necessary to bring a large-scale work to life?

**SHAY:**

Who is permitted to make mistakes in the process, recover, and try something new? For whom does a mistake mean a failed career?

**SARAH:**

These questions have allowed us to identify ways we can encourage artistic rigour and challenge the structures that surround typical artmaking practices.

**SHAY:**

We are enamoured with how these big questions will help us unpack and make sense of what is and is not considered rigorous disability art in the future. The more we attempt to unpack and sense-make our way through creative accessibility and disability arts aesthetics, the more new big questions about disability art arise that we cannot easily answer. These include: Should disabled creatives who develop integrated access features for shows be considered core team members or outside consultants? Given that the classification of productions as disability art is often based on the disability status/identification of the writer/director, will new understandings

of creative access measures as spaces for profound artistry shift the lines between disability art and nondisabled art, with creative access features to allow for more works to be within the banner of disability arts?

**SARAH:**

### **Ambitious Future–Dreaming**

We have ambitious dreams for the future of disability performance creation, presentation, and curation.

**SHAY:**

We dream of a world where disabled artists are regularly integral core creative team members on productions, generating richly creative, integrated accessibility that allows us all to imagine performance as our entertainment, inspiration, escape, and home; where disabled artists being free to create the performances they desire free from commentary about the appropriateness of their bodies, disability needs, and access measures; where we are encouraged to dream of filling the world’s largest stages with packed audiences of our own communities who can joyously and raucously experience performances that will stay with them for a lifetime; where we can change the hearts and minds of our communities and ourselves again and again, and truly see ourselves reflected in the stories we tell, the people who make the works, perform the works, and witness the magic of artistic creation.

**SARAH:**

Can curation heal the world of ableism entirely? No. But the more we can do to welcome different abilities in all of their beautiful and varied facets, render them visible, and build frameworks for rigorous accessibility on our stages and beyond, the more we set the public standards and discourse that allow us to collectively see a future beyond our current limitations.

**SHAY:**

For that, we will all be better off.

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