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Research Articles and Essays

Disability Arts as Disability Justice:

Racialized Disabled Artists Navigating the Arts in Canada

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Abstract

Disability arts contribute to culture and disability justice in Canada, yet racialized disabled artists experience barriers to artistic recognition and accessing artistic spaces and resources. This article explores these obstacles and highlights the role of activist art and the significance of community to better support their work.

Keywords: disability arts, culture, accessibility, Canada

Disability Arts as Disability Justice:

Racialized Disabled Artists Navigating the Arts in Canada

Disability arts and disabled artists make crucial contributions to culture and the social movement toward disability justice in Canada. As noted by the Canada Council for the Arts (2019, p. 3), “Deaf and disability artists are creating countercultural narratives that bring valuable artistic and cultural insight.” Despite the necessity of disability arts for enhancing culture, enabling politicized disability community-building, and for its generative role in disrupting nondisabled and ableist aesthetics, disabled artists, and in particular racialized disabled artists in Canada, continue to experience barriers to artistic recognition and accessing artistic spaces and resources (Ware, 2019; Nelson, 2016). Like other disabled artists, racialized disabled artists often experience economic precarity and structural oppressions resulting from ableism and inaccessibility and “an undervaluing of the achievements and contributions of Deaf and disability artists” that frequently “depriv[es] them of real opportunities for professionalization and collaboration” (Leduc et al. 2020, p. 8). In addition, racialized disabled artists must contend with the ways disability arts in Canada have been predominantly white which has resulted in specific racist barriers and inequities (Ware, 2021; Chandler, 2017). This underscores the vital significance of supporting and amplifying the artistic work of racialized disabled artists to more fully advance social transformations informed by disability justice and culture.

Drawing on an analysis of the supporting grey and academic literature alongside semi-structured interviews with six self-identifying disabled and racialized artists in Canada, our article unpacks some of the exclusionary practices and barriers racialized and disabled artists have faced in participating in Canadian disability arts and culture. In what follows, we discuss our research design and our method of data collection and analysis. We then outline some of the ongoing systemic barriers to participating in disability arts and culture in Canada identified through our research. These issues include recognizing disabled artists as artists, the accessibility of arts applications and funding, the time and pacing of artistic production, and the whiteness of the Canadian disability arts scene. We then turn to considerations related to the importance of disability arts for pushing for disability justice and social change, and in fostering care and community.

Research Design, Data Collection, and Analysis

Over the summer of 2021, with research funding provided by Carleton University through a program designed to offer undergraduate students an opportunity to work alongside a faculty member to design and complete a small research study over the course of one semester, Li and Fritsch began collaborating on a project aiming to better understand the experiences of racialized artists in the Canadian disability arts community. In line with disability justice movements that evoke disability broadly, our use of "disability arts and disabled artists" serves as an umbrella referring to art created by people who self-identify as sick, D/deaf, hard-of-hearing, DeafBlind, low vision, Blind, Mad, mentally ill, neurodiverse, neurodivergent, mentally, cognitively, or developmentally disabled, chronically ill, or people otherwise labelled or pathologized with one or more medical diagnosis. This differs from the Canada Council for the Arts and some other artists, activists, and scholars who position Deaf as distinct from disabled (Fernandes, Navia, and Rouholamini, 2023).

After receiving institutional research board ethics clearance, six participants were recruited online through social media and by sending our recruitment materials to individuals and organizations who work with disabled artists in Canada. A one-time interview with each participant took place over Zoom, lasting approximately one hour. Participants were between 23 and 65 years old, and self-identified as racialized disabled artists. Two participants identified as Black, one as First Nations, and three as South Asian. Three participants self-identified as non-binary, two as female, and one as male. Five were located in the province of Ontario and one in Quebec. As our study aimed to better understand the experiences of racialized disabled artists in the disability arts community in Canada, participants were asked if they had experienced any barriers to their flourishing within disability arts in Canada and if they had ideas about how to mitigate such barriers. Participants were also asked what disability justice means to them, if they understand their art as a form of activism, and what contributions (if any) disability art can make to disability justice.

Our research engaged reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) to analyze our semi-structured, in-depth interviews. RTA is one approach amongst many different forms of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Because of the way we came together to engage in our small collaborative and time limited research project, we were interested in an analysis method that does not have a set number of required participants (Wutich et al., 2024; Braun and Clarke, 2022). Rather than a fixed sample size, RTA emphasizes the depth and quality of data collected alongside other considerations like the practical constraints of the participant population and the resources available to support the research project. RTA also does not strive for saturation (Braun and Clarke, 2021). Instead, RTA emphasizes creativity, reflexivity and active interpretation as themes are produced by the researchers (Braun and Clarke, 2022). RTA was also attractive as a form of analysis because it enabled us to actively construct meaning from our participants' narratives while foregrounding our own interpretive lenses.

We are disabled people actively engaged in non-professional artistic practices and participate in Canadian disability arts culture and disability justice oriented social movements. One of us identifies as Chinese (Li) and the other as a white settler (Fritsch). As emerging and established critical disability studies scholars attentive to power relations, access needs, and the ways people navigate institutional structures, we were interested in participants' experiences of these social relations, and if and how participants experienced and/or resisted ableism/sanism, white supremacy, and capitalist productivity norms. Our positionality in relation to this research aligns with the goals of RTA which prioritizes depth, situated and relational knowledge production, researcher reflexivity, and the centering of underrepresented voices over statistical generalizability (Braun and Clarke, 2022, 2021). Mobilizing RTA reflects our broader commitment as critical disability studies scholars to produce knowledge that is accountable to community, attentive to complexity, and committed to disability justice and social transformation (Clare, 2017).

Following Braun and Clarke's non-linear process of RTA (2022), our data analysis was collaborative, deductive, latent, critical, and iterative, allowing shared meaning across the data set to be constructed through our immersion in the transcripts, interpretation, conversation, and reflection. Our analysis is informed by our own social locations, experiences, our understandings of the grey and academic literatures, and was especially influenced by our attention to, and interest in, the embodied and structural dimensions of the experiences racialized disabled artists articulated in our interviews. Acknowledging our active role in constructing meaning, our findings and discussion are interwoven below, highlighting four themes related to participants articulation of the barriers to participating in Canadian disability arts and culture. These themes are: recognizing and valuing racialized disabled artists as artists, the accessibility of arts applications and funding, the time and pacing of artistic production, and the whiteness of the Canadian disability arts scene. Following this, we also discuss two additional themes generated through our analysis: the importance of disability arts for disability justice and social change, as well as the vital role of racialized disabled artists for fostering care and community.

Structural Obstacles to Disability Arts in Canada

By now it is well documented that disabled artists have historically, and continue to be, excluded from creative spaces in Canada (Kelly and Orsini, 2016). An example of this exclusion is in spaces such as art galleries and museums which do not simply display artworks but offer a purposeful "representation of a community and its highest values and truths" (Duncan, 1995, 8). Institutions such as these play a crucial role in shaping cultural perceptions, determining which bodies, identities, and ideas are deemed valuable. Yet, all too often art created by disabled artists is predominantly understood to be less valuable and only appreciated as beneficial to the disabled artists due to its "therapeutic benefits" (Rose, 2022) and preconceived notions that disability art is "outsider art" (Nelson, 2016, p. 98). For example, Reid highlights how "Mad artists continue to be positioned as outsider artists, devoid of aesthetic and technical skills" (2019, p. 11).

For some racialized disabled artists, a contributing factor to such outsider art results from a lack of access to art education and to adequate art-making supplies. As Jill, a South Asian participant put it in her interview, "I understand that the mainstream art world is very elitist, and you have to have a certain education to even be part of it… because we're people with disabilities, we're often poorer and we cannot afford that type of education." This barrier was affirmed by another South Asian participant, Leila, who told us: "I never went to art school, so being a self-taught artist, it took me a really long time to be recognized as a professional artist."

In addition to educational barriers, participants also noted how a lack of access to appropriate arts supplies has contributed to their exclusion. As Jill commented, "I had to save up over the years to get my art supplies, to actually produce the artwork… because it's really expensive.” Black participant, Keegan, echoed this sentiment that art can be “so inaccessible for disabled people.” They comment: “if you don't have access to like a woodworking space, like you’re not going to be making your sculptures. You know, if you can’t afford studio time. Or if you can't afford like a Mac product…There’s all these barriers that like, you need financial resources to compete with.” Here participants clearly identify and press for increased access to education and supplies as a way of tackling the exclusion of racialized disabled artists in Canadian arts.

To combat the underrepresentation of disabled artists and disability culture in art spaces, Nelson (2016) advocates for the active involvement of institutions and curators in acquiring, representing, and disseminating Canadian art by disabled artists. Despite such recommendations, disability equity within the Canadian disability arts scene remains fraught due in part to the ways disabled people remain “dependent on the non-disabled for access to the arts” (Decottignies, 2016, p. 43). This dependence remains a significant barrier because “under capitalism, artmaking is connected to funding and the process of accessing funds” (Collins, Jones, and Rice, 2023, p. 12). In our interviews, for example, Black, non-binary femme participant Kyisha noted that grant applications “aren’t accessible to everyone” and expressed that learning “how to do that stuff” was difficult.

Some of the ongoing barriers that exist in arts funding processes have been highlighted by the Canada Council for the Arts in their *Environmental Scan of Access Practices in Arts Funding* (Fernandes, Navia, and Rouholamini, 2023). For example, while many of the arts organizations included in the scan offer varying forms of application assistance and supports for disabled artists--including translation of written materials into sign languages, assistance submitting alternative application formats such as video or audio, and feedback on draft applications--the process of requesting and justifying assistance and support “can be a labour-intensive process for applicants,” a form of extra labour that is not required of non-disabled artists (ibid., p. 24). Furthermore, the direct disbursement of funds supporting application assistance processes can impact artists’ taxable income, which can have negative consequences for those relying on social income support programs such as the Ontario Disability Support Program, creating financial insecurity and punitive income reductions. In addition, racialized disabled artists face unique challenges in accessing funding, such as the necessity to creatively address requirements for citizenship or permanent residence status, as well as the need to navigate language and cultural barriers (ibid.). The scan highlights that centering intersectionality in access practices is crucial as many disabled artists face “interlocking oppressions [that] do impact applicants’ access to arts funding” (ibid., p. 23). Access to arts funding, in turn, impacts artist recognition.

While for some of the artists we interviewed the application processes for funding presented barriers, for others time to apply for funds and produce art is a more significant obstacle. Some artists discussed how they need more time in the creation of their art, but also in the application processes for getting the funding necessary for artmaking. Kyisha, for example, noted the importance of pace in their artmaking, explaining how they “can’t produce what I want when I rush.” Kyisha commented, “I also work on my own timeline that’s not necessarily, you know, the standard for the industry or how quickly folks without disabilities can work.” Similarly, Jill noted how “people with disabilities need a longer time to produce their pieces, and if you're applying to grants, sometimes they find it a little bit, I guess annoying to deal with.” Indeed, one finding of the Canada Council for the Arts in their *Environmental Scan of Access Practices in Arts Funding* echoed the need for flexibility in time (ibid.).

Pacing and working at a speed that works for their bodies is not just about an individual accommodation but is, rather, a larger structural and disability justice issue. It is crucial to recognize that while the work of these artists is valuable, it is equally as important to allow for artists to take their time to create their work in ways that embraces their diversity of embodiments and capacities. Slowing down in itself disrupts norms around productivity and capacity; an artist is no less legitimate if they are not able to produce at the pace that capitalism dictates. Jill comments, “I wish I could… produce as much artwork as the regular mainstream artist, but I just can’t… I can’t physically do that much work… people with disabilities need a longer time to produce their pieces.”

Pacing is also a disability justice issue in relation to the time needed to embrace expansive accessibility practices when producing art. Some of our interview participants sought to broaden and disrupt normative expectations of pace in the accessibility practices they engaged during the production of their art. For example, Leila discussed her commitment to access in her artmaking, detailing the process she went through with one of her tactile photography exhibitions which focused on the stories of people with multiple sclerosis (MS). She explained how she was prompted to make this photography exhibition multisensory after consulting with disabled community members. She notes: “during the process, and as I was talking to people, my question was, how would you like to be seen? And someone with MS who is blind [said], ‘I don't know, I can’t see.’ And it really made me consider, okay, how can I create this piece as multisensory?” Leila highlighted the need for a “balance between access and aesthetics,” and the centrality of the community in her art and artistic process.

In incorporating this temporal flexibility in her artmaking, she disrupted normative assumptions about the speed and pace of artistic production, and demonstrated the possibilities that exist when we move beyond what mainstream notions dictate. Leila’s tactile photography exhibition also would not have been possible if she had not taken the time to learn how to create this type of tactile art; as she explained, the process for the exhibition took a lot of time as it was a learning process for her too.

Keegan likewise addressed issues related to time and productivity when discussing the kinds of solutions they envision for improving the current barriers racialized disabled artists face in navigating arts in Canada. Keegan discussed how universal basic income would be incredibly impactful for disabled racialized artists in that people wouldn't "have to worry about rent." Keegan noted: "I think there would be so much of a Renaissance that could happen, like the amount of energy and time that people could invest into their creative process if they didn't have to worry about surviving." Having a guaranteed income would enable disabled racialized artists to take their time with their creative processes in ways that could enable a different future of art making, a future that could include rest and time for reflection. Similarly, disabled writer Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha writes about the role of what they call "dream time" in their creative process; they explain that this is the "time for the stories to grow," and that when they listen to their disabled body and take time off, they are able to "give in to the bed, to the dreams, to the long, long sleeps and times curled up" resulting in "words curl[ing] close to me" (2018, p. 184-185). Here, in their embrace of different temporalities, disabled racialized artists move us towards "imagining different futures…[that] might help us see, and do, the present differently" (Kafer, 2013, p. 28).

Another major barrier identified in our interviews is the need to better center the intersectional experiences of racialized disabled artists in order to best inform structural transformations. For example, Kyisha described how "mainstream disability art space has been… dominated by white folks and like, non-Black and non-Indigenous people," making it "challenging, just to kind of, make space for myself." Other artists like South Asian participant, Kiran, explained their struggle with being a part of various communities that do not always overlap in ways that feel affirming. Kiran highlighted some of the questions she asks herself because of these fractured intersections: "do I want to be disabled today or do I want to be Tamil today? … [D]o I want to be Tamil or do I want to be queer? Do I want to be queer or do I want to be disabled?" These perspectives speak to the importance of centering the experiences and needs of racialized disabled artists and creating more spaces that explicitly respond to the issues these artists raise. These responses also demonstrate that disability arts spaces themselves have similar pitfalls as mainstream arts when it comes to racialized artists. In this way, disabled art spaces are not always as disruptive as white disabled artists might envision in relation to the mainstream. Key to addressing this is to acknowledge how "Indigenous and racialized individuals who experience disability may intervene in ways that upset any neat ordering of identities" (Kelly and Orsini, 2016, p. 7).

The experiences of artists like Kyisha underscore the dominance of white perspectives in the mainstream disability art space. The struggle of navigating fragmented identities, as expressed by Kiran, emphasizes the urgency of creating explicitly intersectional spaces in disability arts. Indeed, Black artist Gloria C. Swain has noted how disability arts spaces are not as disruptive as they might aspire to be, in that "the art world in general privileges able-bodied white men and, similarly, the disability art world privileges white disabled men because the majority of existing spaces are white art spaces" (2019, p. 22-23). Black, trans, and disabled artist and scholar Syrus Marcus Ware also discusses the issue of how disability arts in Canada are "a white-washed endeavour," writing that "Disability arts has failed disabled artists of colour by creating a white supremacist elite club of practitioners whose work rarely engages in questions of race and intersectionality. The impact of these tendencies is wide-reaching. The omission of racialized perspectives in these arts practices centres white disability experience as the disability experience, skewing our understanding of the very different ways in which disabled people on the margins experience the world at large and artistic communities in particular" (2021, p. 5). This demonstrates the importance of funding, supporting, and amplifying the voices of Black, Indigenous, and racialized disabled artists.

However, this is not a call for arts spaces and institutions to tokenize multiply marginalized artists. Michel Dumont (2020), a Métis, Two-Spirit artist, for example, has noticed that "galleries can be very ineffectual at accommodation, while providing superficial solutions that aren't necessarily driven by the needs of the artist." He continues, "For many years, the apparent answer for art institutions in Canada seemed to be the tokenization of just a few representatives of BIPOC and disabled artists." Avoiding tokenization can mean ensuring that artists are engaged for their art and not only to address barriers. As Leila put it, "as a disabled racialized artist, I am a little tired of always being asked about my barriers and not about my art." While it is essential to ask artists what they need in order to best address ongoing structural barriers for racialized disabled artists to participate and flourish in the arts in Canada, it is also key to not let this detract from centering the artists and their art works.

All of this underscores the imperative of dismantling systemic barriers within the disability arts scene in Canada as highlighted in our interviews and the supporting literature. By embracing equity practices informed by disability justice, a more inclusive and transformative landscape can be cultivated, ensuring that disabled artists of all backgrounds are given the platform they deserve to better focus on the production and dissemination of their art.

Disability Justice and Art for Social Change

In addition to themes related to the exclusionary structural barriers impacting racialized disabled artists in Canada, another major theme generated by our analysis is the importance of art as pushing for social change and activism. Creating disability art is not only a creative act, but also a political one that, when grounded in disability justice and disability culture, challenges normative values and disrupts dominant aesthetics, enables politicized community-building, and fosters expansive accessibility practices. In what follows, we expand on each these contributions.

Disability arts disrupts dominant narratives around disability “by offering multiple representations of disability experience that celebrate and desire disabled life and disability community” (White, 2017, p. 134). By taking up space in the public through art, disability arts hold a transformative role in shifting our views of disability and can impact the daily lives of disabled people (Chandler et al., 2021). As Chandler argues, “disability art is vital to the disabled people’s movement for its imaginings and perpetuations of new understandings of disability and new worldly arrangements that can hold, even desire, them” (2018, p. 458-459). Other scholars like Kafai have also discussed the relationship between art and activism and how “the connecting of art and activism … mobilizes and creates profound social change. It gifts us with the ability to ignite a self and communal recognition that reroutes us back to our luscious, disabled, queer of color selves” (2021, p. 46). Discussing the power of disabled storytelling to disrupt dominant narratives around disability, Kafai writes that “In sharing our crip stories, we unearth legacies of colonialism and nondisabled supremacy. We… craft ourselves new routes to follow” (2021, p. 37).

Jeff, a First Nations participant, noted how his perspective led him to craft new routes by understanding colonialism itself as a form of disablement, leading him to curate an exhibition on residential schools. He commented, “If I didn’t have a disability, I wouldn’t have been a curator or curated that exhibition… in terms of my disability, it’s given me the opportunity to be active in terms of my addressing some of the systemic problems that we have." As participant Jill echoed: "I feel like we should tell our own [stories], and each of us have our own unique experience with ableism… We see problems that other people don't see as problems." Jill commented further: "I think my art is a lot about like expressing a lot of the hardships I faced with the medical system." These hardships, however, can be complexified and nuanced through art grounded in disability justice. As Jill put it, "because of my experience as a like woman of color, I can't deny how like, white supremacy and misogyny works in making my experience with the medical system a lot harder and a lot more difficult."

Keegan also highlighted that oppression works in part through camouflage and that art plays a role in revealing the material conditions of how oppression manifests. Art is, Keegan argued, "a statement of… I exist. I'm here. And like, that draws attention to the all the different ways that colonialism and all different types of oppression exist. I feel like so much oppression manifests because people don't talk about it or because it's like hidden." Kyisha echoed this, noting, "All the art that I make is about the things that I believe in, and about the changes that I see that need to be made, the gaps, you know? … I do feel like my art is activism in that I'm creating it to make change and I'm creating it to start conversations."

Further understandings of how art can be a vehicle for disrupting dominant narratives around disability emerged across other interviews. For example, Kiran said "it's my way of taking up space and being like, listen to me, hear me, hear these stories that are so often neglected, or maybe not even underrepresented, but like intentionally cut out because it makes people uncomfortable or sad." Kiran highlighted how taking up space through their art is also a way to demand for people to invest their time in hearing their stories as a disabled and racialized artist. This can also be seen as disruptive to normative assumptions on how time should be valued and spent, as a non-disabled person’s time is often seen as more valuable or important, and rarely are people encouraged to invest time in disability culture or community.

These responses highlight how disability arts spaces cannot only be an avenue for disrupting the literal artistic aesthetics that dominate in the mainstream arts world, but they also disrupt neoliberal aesthetics which perpetuate ideas of how “burdensome” disabled people are, frequently using such ideas as justification to promote or implement austerity policies. Similar to Nishida’s (2022, p. 172) arguments on the value of bed activism and how it can also serve as “a way to visiblize and value the richness of time spent in bed, no matter how it may be registered as unproductive in the hegemonic society or unpleasant it may feel,” our findings suggest that disability arts can be a similar vehicle for disrupting broader norms about productivity and capacity. Particularly for racialized disabled artists who face additional expectations to not “inconvenience” others with their access needs or care needs--as Piepzna-Samarasinha writes “many of us had been raised to survive by never having needs” (2022, p. 36)--taking up space through these artmaking practices is especially important.

While the majority of interviewed artists noted how their art also serves as activism and how there are educational benefits of artmaking, disability arts can also be understood as an act of survival for these artists. Not just through the creation of these arts, but also as Reid argues, “to change, unsettle, transform, and transgress the larger art world” (Reid, 2019, p. 7). As Lee (n.d.) argues, “The formation of a distinct disability culture through art motions not only to the transformative possibilities of art, but points to its potential to reinvent reality itself.” Cultural work like what the artists we interviewed are creating, is not solely an avenue for educating non-disabled people and broader society, but a disruptive tool for collective liberation. While certainly disability arts can be educational in how they may prompt non-disabled people to reframe how they see disability, disability arts "advances a disruptive, anti-assimilationist politic" and it would be difficult to disentangle the movement from its politics (Chandler et al., 2021, p. 173). Not only are disability arts a disruptive force through which crip futurities can be imagined, but they also document disabled existence--they enable these artists to take up space and loudly proclaim they exist.

In taking up space in this way, the importance of disability arts to broader social change is deeply related to the role of their art in fostering care and community. Jill noted how she uses "art as a tool to find community" since it can be difficult to find other disabled people who share similar experiences. Leila also expressed how she centers community feedback in her own creation process, which demonstrates how a commitment to care is very central to disability arts, and specifically disability justice artmaking. Leila explains how her "work is multisensory," making it "very much about, you know, consulting with folks with disabilities whenever possible." She also builds care into her artmaking process not just when considering the actual creation of the art, but from the grant writing stage: "I consider access costs and access needs as much as possible." She explains how her experiences learning about multisensory artmaking through a disability arts organization in Canada "deeply influenced how I make my art and how I welcome people to experience it." She further explains that "It's not just about the artwork. It's about, how do you create artwork that enables folks to feel like they've been considered … It's not just about I have to, it's a deep want, to welcome folks with disabilities to my exhibitions."

The ways disabled and racialized artists like Leila have built in these intentional acts of caring into all aspects of their artmaking is disruptive to normative approaches to the production of art. For example, as Leila's artwork is multisensory, she has "had a couple of exhibitions, thinking about the vibrations, thinking about the tactility, touching something in a mainstream art space." Specifically, she asks questions like "how can you play with the senses to create something fun and challenge these spaces that are historically quite ableist. Why not touch sculptures? Why not think about touching photographs… how do you take a photograph to be touched instead of seeing?" Leila's intentional integration of care extends beyond the creation of the artwork itself, permeating every stage from grant writing to the exhibition space. This care challenges normative assumptions about art production. By consciously considering access costs and needs, Leila is disrupting traditional expectations and fostering a deep sense of consideration for the disabled audience. Similarly, disability justice enacted for Kyisha is about making sure people's needs are met; whether that be by having interpreters present or providing support through funds for therapy, Kyisha creates space for the artists participating in their projects "to be able to come to the work fully and participate fully."

In a world that often devalues the lives of disabled individuals, the cultural work of racialized disabled artists becomes even more crucial. Their creations stand as a testament to disabled richness within an ableist society, deeply embedded in the affective, politically aesthetic fabric of crip cultural production driven by care. Keegan emphasized the influence of disability justice to create space for people who don't have "industry contacts" or "fancy equipment" to "come as you are." Keegan had helped organize an open mic night for Black people and they were thrilled by how many disabled people signed up. "That was really powerful for me," Keegan commented, "just to see this whole community of people come together to talk about their experiences, and to like create beautiful music, and like tell people their poetry, show people their art… I thought that was really, really special and powerful." Creating disabled arts spaces can produce opportunities for communities to connect and gather, and as Kiran highlighted: “I think like a lot of people who do events programming for disability justice, they do it with the intent of, like there is an intention of, you know, creating these spaces. It’s not just done by accident. People aren’t like, oh, I’m accidentally going to do an event dedicated to disability justice. And I think it’s done with a lot of like love in people’s hearts and care for the community. And I think when you’re putting that at the forefront, like, of course, it's going to be so different than like if it's an afterthought.” Generally, the artists found that disability arts spaces were more accessible to navigate than mainstream arts spaces. Keegan’s noted barriers in the mainstream arts scene include a lack of community care: “I think disability justice in general really emphasizes community care, you know what I mean? And like, coming together, like not leaving people behind. So, I’ve seen like lots of cool like arts collectives… fundraising to like buy this person a replacement amp because their amp fucked up… I feel like there’s like more support in that way.” Some others highlighted how generative disability arts spaces are for them; for example, Leila discussed how “I think that the disability arts scene in Canada really taught me about what it’s like to feel like I’m treated with dignity, and respect, and worth, and it's really what I want to consider in the art that I make, is that kind of feeling of love and dignity. And that’s been incredibly inspired by the disability arts community here.”

Keegan found the disability arts scene to be more accessible than the mainstream Canadian arts world commenting, “I feel like disabled people recognize like how hard life is for us, a lot of the time. Or like how difficult things can be.” The disability arts scene seeks to make space where “people can do the things that they love without having to sacrifice their wellbeing, or not having to, you know, burn themselves out or hurt themselves trying to do it.” Here, Keegan found “kinship with other disabled artists” as a way to deal with barriers in the Canadian arts scene. Leila too noted that “There's something just so enriching, and nourishing, and validating, with being with other disabled artists, like Mad, Deaf, disabled artists.” Of being at a disabled arts event in Canada Leila said: “I feel like there was actually glitter in the air, like sparkles in the air.” At this event, there was not “a hierarchy of ability. And it was beautiful.” This is contrasted with the mainstream as articulated by Kiran: “I think in the mainstream, a lot of times it is an afterthought, like it’s oops, like we forgot there's someone with a wheelchair coming, and that like really sucks.”

Our participants also discussed how the disability arts spaces they have participated in challenge mainstream arts spaces in a variety of ways. One of the ways this happens is through its community-building potential. One of the solutions that Leila envisioned for improving all of the barriers that disabled racialized artists face in navigating these disability arts spaces, was to “have gathering spaces where it's not about doing things, but about resting together as disabled artists.” This idea grew out of a conversation Leila had with Jessica Watkin, as they discussed how while many disability arts events and spaces can be wonderful, they are also an “intense time” that are packed with activities. Instead, they wished for “opportunities for us to come together and be. Without having a whole bunch of stuff to do, and just be together, because I think that that's where collaborations are formed and where we can kind of just chill together.” Keegan similarly explained how “a lot of people just want to jam, you know? They just want to create like with their friends, and then show them, like let’s get a charcuterie board and let’s look at each other’s art while we eat this cheese.” Disability arts creates all sorts of crip cultural space, and while often these spaces can also be opportunities for education or for broader engagement, as these responses show, it is also crucial to cultivate arts spaces meant just for being in community with each other as disabled artists.

Disability arts spaces also assert access to be an integral part of creative content and the artistic process from inception to presentation (Jacobson and McMurchy, 2010, p. 8). Jeff discussed how his access practices have been grounded in disability culture: "I've been able to be very successful with what I've been able to do and accomplish, and it didn't really come from ignoring my disability, it came from recognizing my disability and figuring out a way to continue to go, or finding a way to go forward with it." As Jeff began to experience decreased mobility, he switched from processing film to using digital photography, and as physically setting up his shots became too demanding, he also began taking photographs from his inside his car. Jeff's experiences also highlight how access needs can evolve and how the changing reality of his disability is entangled with his artmaking.

Disability arts in Canada is vital in its transformative potential to enable politicized community-building and disrupt preconceptions about disability. Engaging in disability art is not just a creative endeavor; it is a powerful political act challenging normative values and disrupting prevailing aesthetics.

Conclusion

Artmaking provides opportunities to not just envision what a disabled future can look like, but actually "making--even if it's just for a few hours--the next world that's possible" (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2022, p. 196). This next world is not just about how the art might guide our imaginations of disabled futures, but also in the care that is embedded in many of these artists' processes of artmaking and creation. In analyzing these artists' experiences navigating both disability arts and mainstream arts spaces, it becomes clear how important their art is to not only community-building but also to disability culture and disability justice. As Kyisha articulated "disability justice to me is my vision of freedom." This cultural work is so vital during a time when governments and institutions have promoted a deep devaluation of disabled lives. The work that Black, Indigenous, and racialized disabled artists continue to lovingly create is “a phenomenal disabled richness within an ableist scarcity wasteland” (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2022, p. 179). As Alice Wong writes in her memoir, “many of us know the safety net has gaping holes and the state will not save us, so we’re going to save ourselves with abundance, wisdom, joy, and love” (2022, p. 270).

Disability arts and the contributions of disabled artists play a pivotal role in shaping disability culture and propelling the disability justice movement. Despite the indispensable nature of disability arts in enriching disability culture, fostering politicized community-building, and challenging non-disabled and eugenicist aesthetics, disabled artists in Canada, particularly those who are racialized, encounter persistent barriers to artistic recognition and access to creative spaces and resources. It is vitally important to support and amplify racialized disabled artists to more fully advance social transformations informed by disability justice and culture in Canada and beyond.

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