

# Crip, Arts: Community Trajectories and Agendas

By seeley quest

My crip art-making politics came of age from being in a particular place at a particular time. i'm from the United States and moved to the San Francisco Bay Area when 22 in 1998, to be with queer political community. In 1999, i began living with a power-chair-using dyke who needed a housemate; she had been active in Berkeley, California's Wry Crips Disabled Women's Theatre Group since the mid-1980s. After learning more about disability culture from her, and wondering where i fit in relation to it, in 2000 i went back to school to finish a bachelor of arts in performance studies and gender studies. At the end of that year, i came to terms with being disabled and trans. Much as the Bay Area's zeitgeist of the time in gender questioning and trans identities influenced me, i benefited also from living where the Disability Rights Movement was effectively born in the United States. With the built environment's common accessibility features supporting the presence of disabled residents out and about, i encountered more disabled activists than ever before in multiple arts milieus and social movements.

My BA thesis solo show, completed in 2001, was a creation project exploring the interrelationships of my disabled and gender-variant experiences; the playscript is now published in a disability theatre anthology (Sefel et al.). Attending the first (so far, only) International Queer Disability Conference there in 2002 connected me and other community arts workers further: i got to perform an excerpt from my show and met especially attendees from the western United States but also from across continents, and we followed up for years with an active listserv.

Since 2001, i'd begun performing poems, monologues, songs, choreography, and the like in mixed lineups and cabarets around the Bay—often content regarding disability experiences. i've passed as abled for a majority of my life, yet have also experienced periods as very apparently disabled, and medicalized stigma since childhood. Once i accepted that my experiences counted, i felt a need to illuminate this in short-form theatrical work. My 'passing' has allowed me to bridge communities, to get attention from abled audiences positioned to learn more about allyship, and to be part of the wave bringing forth narratives of nuance, performance work unpacking episodic conditions, chronic illness, and hidden disabilities. While groups like Wry Crips led the way for community members with apparent physical disabilities to stage their narratives, i've observed a momentum since the mid-2000s in US, UK, and Canadian performance art for work referencing

HIV, cancer, cognitive and psychiatric diagnoses, and a broader range of experiences alongside those of obvious sensory difference or physical impairments.

A project that grew into an organization and has circulated paradigms for just cultural production, which has influenced Canadian disabled performance makers, is *Sins Invalid*. *Sins* came to be because of the overlaps of racialized, disabled, queer, sex-positive, and DIY artist communities in the Bay Area, bringing the founders, Patty Berne and Leroy Moore, together with their first receptive local audiences. On tour during *Sins*'s 2006 debut show, i was excited to join as a performer for the next 2007 show and then continue to work with them until i moved from the Bay Area in 2015.

Practices that Patty and Leroy modelled for ensemble check-ins included stating our access needs and supporting everyone's participation collectively to the extent possible. These practices have been part of some traditions, such as in feminists' consciousness-raising circles, rap groups and wisdom councils of communities of colour, and disabled comrades specifying things they need to accessibly participate in organizing meetings together; *Sins* wasn't the first project to do this. However, among the handful of organized disabled theatrical arts producers in the United States and Canada as of the mid-2000s, *Sins Invalid* contributed a unique influence.

We were linked with audience communities more racially diverse than most previous 'crip art' ones. We were able to access funding for high production values, aesthetically slick graphic designs and promotional art, and feature artists presenting explicit work about our sexualities at levels rarely seen in disabled ensembles. *Sins* became the first example in English-speaking North America of a performance ensemble that was begun and led by racialized and apparently physically disabled artists, which had these content, community, and production values. *Sins*'s founding principles of Disability Justice were promoted by social media via the queer, gender-variant, BIPOC, Deaf, and disabled audiences who intersected in the Bay and overlapped in media networks with peers across the continent (for more analysis, see Kafai). Clear messaging about disability justice requiring equitable, relational practices, centring the leadership of the most impacted, and further principles has informed community and arts work in Canada since then, including mine.



A mix of multi-racial Deaf and disabled adults are in a circle in a performance space; smiling, talking, ASL signing, in a documentary action shot. There is a text caption from voiceover, which says "Most artists with disabilities have not had a chance to incubate their work publicly." (l-r): Leroy Moore, Alex Cafarelli, Antoine Hunter, Odie Ashford, Aurora Levins Morales, seeley quest, Maria Palacios, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha.

Photo courtesy of *Sins Invalid*

My practice so far is most driven by varied projects and in the past several years has been shaped by efforts to immigrate to a country without federal protections equivalent to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). My earlier occupation of presenting short pieces in mixed lineups, and of organizing cabarets myself to feature both disabled and abled work, was mostly volunteer based. i did a small grant application for a showcase i co-organized on trans sexuality; that was only for a bursary of limited funding by the producing queer arts festival. Otherwise, i participated mainly as a performer while keeping 'day jobs.' Project leads, such as *Sins Invalid* or the trans cabaret initiators i toured with, managed the details of funds available to pay our performing cohorts.

As a small events producer, i started from the DIY context, over time increasingly working to provide accommodations for performers and audiences, but typically unable to offer payment besides that gathered by audience donations. i'm encouraged by the existence of dedicated Canada Council funds for Deaf and disability arts work and the recent addition of funds to cover application accessibility costs. However, the nationalist framework limiting grants support to artists with permanent-resident or citizen status is ableist. Since moving to Quebec, motivated to scale up group productions that i can't execute without funds, i must navigate a lack of supports for disabled applicants through the immigration process, and a lack of direct access to necessary project monies. My practice requires seeking support and collaborators in all directions, and patience with slow creation timelines, spanning multiple years (over five) since first outlining project ideas in pitches to peers.

With continued activism and creative work explicitly associated with Disability or Deaf arts, by 2022 i observe more incorporation of our work and awareness of our realities in the largest Canadian cities. However, in less populated centres such as Saskatoon, crip artists in the past year have expressed how much further local recognition of disability performance work needs to develop.

One of my big projects is considering how to cultivate community engagement with a provocative crip-centred script, to tour to both larger and smaller cities. i'm disinclined to ask disabled actors from one geography to incur the costs of travelling long distances. Instead, i am more interested in touring the premise of co-developing a script that tailors to specific members and dynamics of each regional setting the script gets explored in.

We need more projects bridging 'professional production' and 'community arts' activities. 'Community arts' can have art therapy goals and often not be taken seriously by 'professional art world' critics—however, therapeutic effects and community participation in performance endeavours are outcomes to be embraced with professional-level support. i want to build fresh iterations of the crip-centring script project among local disabled populations in multiple cities. It will be more of a stretch in some to find enough participants who are up for collaboratively acting, directing, technically designing, and crafting a version that actually reflects local input, yet getting the resources to stage this opportunity for direct engagement with the themes will prompt more change in those locations.

We need shared spaces to deeply explore narratives that disabled creators can make that are 'authentic' and also fantastical; room for expressions both honest and inventive. Often, performance work by disabled creators has elements of lived experience and sometimes autobiography. We need freedom to convey very personal material, but not to be limited to expectations of doing that only in naturalistic ways, or of using narratives considered 'authentically' personal and reliable. We must resist pressure to simplify our narratives, and our aesthetic and design choices for presenting them. Catalin Brylla states:

Eliciting a sense of ambiguity in the spectator is essential to the task of challenging and overturning the perceived



otherness of social groups that are consistently stereotyped ... overcom[ing] binaries, schematic categories and totalising knowledge.... As Kate Nash (2011, p. 238) explains ... human particularity can only persist if “the images speak of doubt, uncertainty, and plurality of meaning.” (92–93)

Representing complexity motivates my efforts to source varieties of disabled perspectives and to generate ideas collaboratively for my projects, including a crip-centred script (called *Modeling*). This project involves disabled actors performing challenges of behavioural boundaries, and processing characters who are ambiguous beyond being simply villainous or heroic. Staging characters who are flawed in perhaps unexpected yet truthful ways, and exploring beyond conventions of realism, are goals for my ongoing work. Representing disabled characters and narratives as one-dimensional doesn't allow for our complex, fallible humanity.

i'm interested to theatrically unpack assumptions about desire and how we might connect to it in respectful ways, while our relationships with embodiment have been damaged by ableism



A group of peer adults of varying ages developing political art in the Arts & Climate Initiative's annual Incubator. Standing in a circle in a rehearsal venue, several participants are looking at each other and smiling. (l-r): Suki Dewey, Chantal Bilodeau, Zoey Zimmerman, seeley quest, Devon Hardy, Rebecca Fletcher, Lisa Kitchens.

Photo by Lydia Borowicz

trauma. One component of my intention here is to shift a lack of attention so far to 'me too' experiences with sexual harassment of disabled people, and the implications of it being perpetrated by disabled peers as well as by abled folks. Gauging what we actually desire and consent to sexually is complicated by ableism imposing phobias, fetishism, and pressures to only seek romantic or sexual potential with other disabled people, and also to reject the appeal of disabled peers, pursuing affiliation only with abled potential partners.

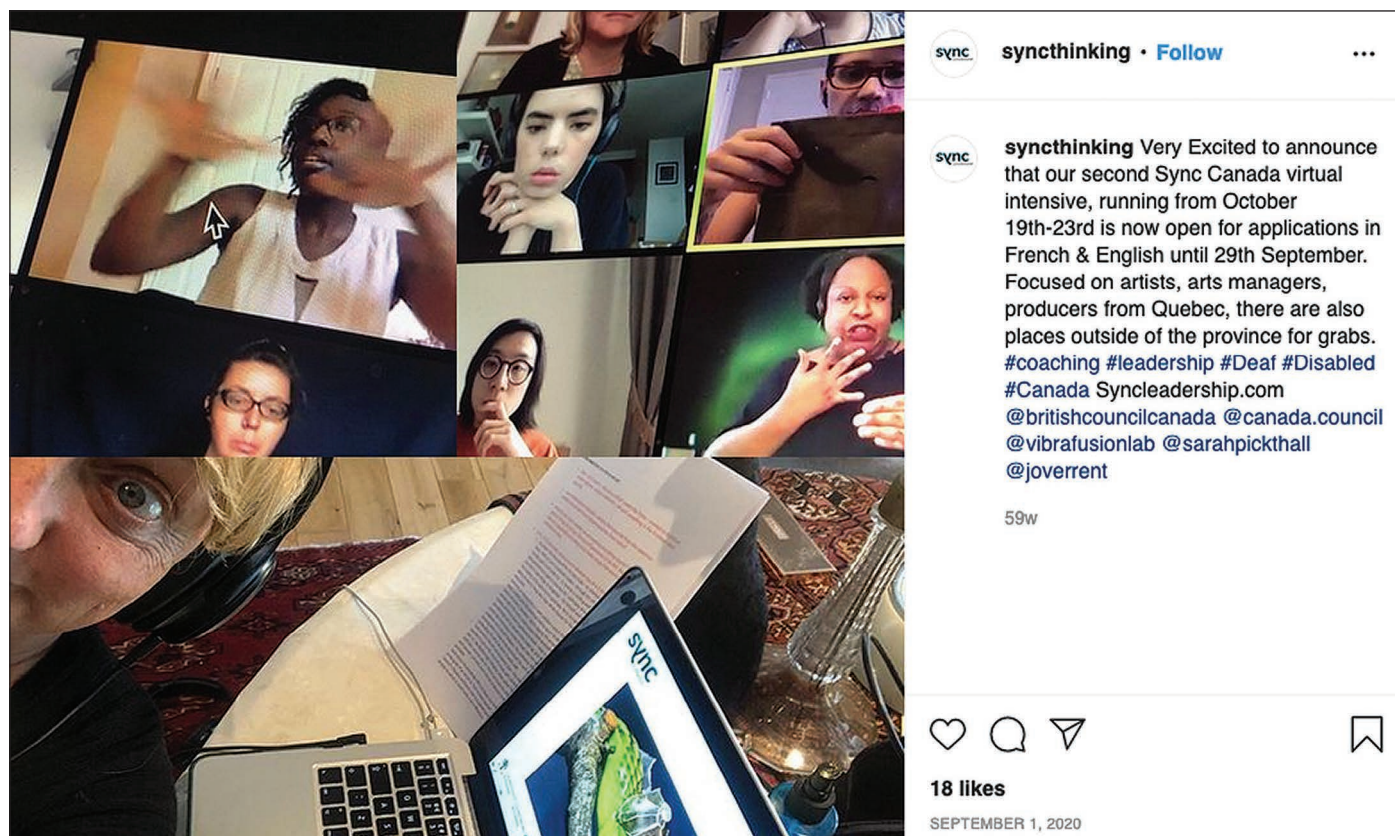
This script calls for finding physically disabled actors willing to perform content explicitly involving sexual power dynamics, physical exposure, and vulnerability about our bodies/minds. Considering the lack of supports so far for many disabled people in Canada to go through any formal theatre training, i'm hopeful outreach will yield disabled folks of local communities, and collaborative workshopping to develop the play's inflections unique to performers might draw bold untrained actors to the stage.

Further, as a trans playwright, i have design goals of characters without assigned genders and a break in conventions of how actors are linked with roles. For *Modeling*, a two-hander with characters of a model and a photographer with different disabilities, in production, at least two actors will prepare to perform the photographer's role, and at least two to perform the model's. This advertised design will let audiences know that cast rotation will highlight different power dynamics in potentially gender-queer, trans, or homo or hetero cisgender pairings.

The model character has a subtler disability, and the photographer some variety of a more perceptible condition, so each iteration's specifics with regard to the performers' physicalities and preferences will inform whether A and B each play one role and then switch roles, or whether C and D actors will be included to present different pairings during alternating shows. Some performances could feature an actor as a photographer maneuvering a camera, and then that actor as a model who has less mobility for posing than is usually considered 'typical,' if the person consents and wants to inhabit that role. There's opportunity to open questions of who is allowed to do what work, allowed to assert power undermining normativity and to stretch the imagination.

Alongside fostering more crip participation in acting our self-authored work, i'm keen on disabled technical team workers too. There are more in the United Kingdom, but still very few spaces of theatre production in Canada that have lighting, sound, set, props, costumes, and stage managing from designers out as disabled. Alice Sheppard's *Kinetic Light* company is rare in the United States for building disabled designers into their core team ("Bios"). We need mentoring opportunities and training that specifically support disabled creatives to get into tech booths and scene shops, as well as work in dramaturgy, directing, production graphics and advertising design, box office, the gamut. There are some disabled practitioners in these roles across the country, but mainly under the radar; i'm ready for a public database for self-identified disabled theatre workers, linking those offstage and onstage to build fuller 'for us, by us' work together.

We must also lead initiatives to change funding frameworks, so all theatre producers can budget in more time and rest during show cycles. We must normalize accessibility not just with 'relaxed



A mix of Deaf and disabled adults are shown participating in a Zoom call; some are communicating in ASL, and there is text from Instagram post of the images, commenting on the value of disabled and Deaf communications and collaborations for leadership.

Clockwise from bottom-left: closeup of Sarah Pickthall, Amanda Hyde, Jenelle Rouse, Kristina McMullin, Kate Walsh, Marcia Martins, and Sean Lee. Photo by Sarah Pickthall

performances' but also in 'relaxed' event production. i'm inspired by peers' movement in the field on these issues, and determined to contribute my part that accelerates culture shifts regarding disability and performing arts in North America.

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## About the Author

seeley quest is a trans disabled performer, writer, facilitator, and environmentalist. Working in literary and body-based composition, and curation, hir playscript "Crooked" is in *At the Intersection of Disability and Drama*, and hir work was in Buddies in Bad Times' *Rhubarb Festival* 2021. Not on social media, sie is at [questletters.substack.com](https://questletters.substack.com).

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