

**Toward a Queer Crip Aesthetic:  
Dance, Performance, and the Disabled Bodymind**

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THESIS

Submitted as partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Science in Disability and Human Development  
in the Graduate College of the  
University of Illinois at Chicago, 2017

Chicago, Illinois

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to my advisor Carrie Sandahl for trusting my commitment to this work, for getting excited about my ideas, for impeccable snark, and for never un-cripping this process. I am grateful each day for her mentorship and will always use it as a guide for how I will mentor others. And thank you, deeply, for encouraging me to be an artist.

It is with great humility and honor that I thank my committee members, Dr. Carrie Sandahl, Dr. Akemi Nishida, and James Charlton, not just for their support through the writing process, but for their presence in this work. I know that the reason I can imagine this crip future in art is because of the people who laid the groundwork for it. It is an honor to be in your orbit, to study under you, and to be here in this cultural location.

Thank you to my friends in and out of the Department who offered guidance, support, their master's thesis as a guide, space to vent and process, and affirming words. Thank you to Nino Cipri for their assistance in editing.

Thank you to my queer family who I met during the DanceAbility training in Helsinki for reminding me that we could still find our radical spaces inside spaces of liberal inclusion. The time we spent together and the ideas we bounced around drives a great deal of my thinking on this project. Thank you especially to Lau Lukkarila and Sally Davidson for extensive conversations on this topic in the time following my trip to Finland.

And thank you to Carrie Sandahl, the Department of Disability and Human Development, the College of Applied Health Sciences, and the Anne Hopkins Scholarship Award for the support in funding.

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## SUMMARY

Although contemporary dance and performance has often included disabled people, inclusion typically comes in the form of adapting traditionally non-disabled forms for the disabled body. This practice is most often called “physically integrated dance,” an inclusive approach in which disabled and non-disabled people dance together. When this approach entered the dance world in the 1980s and 1990s, it was a new frontier. However, physically integrated dance came at the cost of simplifying the disability experience and disengaging from a more politicized approach.

Disabled people have been present in art-making for decades, but the mere inclusion of disabled people in dance and performance created (and continues to create) a veneer of “sameness” between disabled people and their non-disabled peers. This approach obscured the possibility of generating representation that aestheticized and politicized disability. Through critical analysis, I explore the history and current manifestation of inclusion as a tactic for creating integrated art, noting the pitfalls of this approach. In the search for alternatives, I recognize and analyze examples of performance that engage intersectional identity and push the boundaries of integration through the politicization of disability and explicit rejection of the mainstream. In other instances, alternatives use the disabled body and mind as a source of creative material. I call this latter form “crip aesthetics.” Through using the examples of art practitioners who experiment with crip aesthetics, I create a vision for breaking away from inclusion models, taking values from the countercultural models, and ultimately moving toward crip aesthetics in our own art practices.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The use of the lived experience of disability in dance can be a way to strengthen disability identity, create community, and forge intersectional connections between disabled people and other minority communities. I examine integrated dance in its early and current forms, honoring the impact that this work had when it first entered the scene, but articulating the need to extend options past these inclusion-based and less politicized approaches to dance. I call for movement toward bolder “crip aesthetics” that radically affirm the disabled body and mind. In evaluating past dance and performance work and surrounding texts, I explore how dance groups such as DanceAbility, AXIS Dance Company, Cleveland Dancing Wheels, and Candoco include disabled dancers as a learning tool for audiences and to enrich the form (Jerome Robbins Dance Division; DanceAbility International). However, in creating opportunities for integration and unification, these groups do not address disability culture, and thus decenter disability. This subsumes disabled dancers into their inclusive structures instead of extending into more sociopolitical realms of understanding identity that highlights the differences in the lived experience of disability. In the search for other manifestations of disability in performance, I analyze several other approaches that are less frequently represented, but provide options for what a more politicized, identity-based approach to dance and performance could be. In my discussion of these alternatives, I analyze the politicization and intersectionality of *Sins Invalid*, and then move on to work where I see a crip aesthetic emerging, such as in the work of Bob Flanagan and Petra Kuppens.

## 1.1 The Anchor and the Vision

I propose that we move away from integrated dance, and toward crip performance—an approach and aesthetic in which non-disabled dancers can potentially<sup>1</sup> have involvement, but where disabled performers hold primacy of voice and control their own movement technique. I raise the question, “What happens when disabled dancers and performers are left to our own devices and perceive our disabled bodies and minds as a source of creative material?” In my subsequent analysis, I use tenets of various companies and performance styles and develop a blueprint that outlines how we can use crip aesthetics to pave the way for a form that emerges from the disabled bodymind.<sup>2</sup>

I broaden my scope to provide background for this work, touching on the history of disabled artists involved in contemporary dance as well as the history and defining characteristics of disability art and culture. I look to pre-existing pieces, discourse, and companies, but do not address the intentions or beliefs of the founders as more complete histories or social science analyses might do. Rather, I approach this as a discourse analysis: an investigation of the constellation of texts surrounding these groups. When I do discuss intention, it is only in reference to what has been said or written publicly.

It is important to note that the chapters of this thesis do not function chronologically as genealogy. The most common option in which disabled artists can participate in dance and

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<sup>1</sup> Dance as “togetherness” has been a repeated trope through integrated dance, which I believe can be problematic and reinforce hierarchies and decrease safety in certain situations. I see value in disability-only spaces as well as disability-centric spaces, as well as these spaces of assumed equality.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this thesis, I use the term “bodymind” first used in trauma studies, and subsequently developed in a Disability Studies context by Margaret Price (2015) to resolve the rhetorical and practical problem in which the body and mind are understood and addressed as separate entities, and where “disability” more often denotes physicality. She articulates “bodymind” as, “a socio-politically constituted and material entity that emerges through both structural (power- and violence-laden) contexts and also individual (specific) experience” (271).

performance art is still integrated dance and other inclusive forms of art; the emergence of more countercultural and politicized models did not do away with the inclusion approach. Rather, all of these forms exist concurrently. My proposal to encourage the creation of crip aesthetics is to acknowledge work that has already happened and to define the specificities of this aesthetic in hopes of promoting the further creation of work within it. I acknowledge achievements of integrated dance, but ultimately call for a shift: a dance politic and vocabulary that is complexly embodied (Siebers); that does not simply include disabled artists or make dance adaptable to the disabled body, but rather allows for disability to structure and influence the form itself. I consider disability embodiment to be the way that our particular bodies and minds influence our vantage points and social experiences, and thus approach embodied art such as dance and performance as an opportunity for coalition building and Disability identity construction. I claim that those things are not fully possible without crip aesthetics.

## 1.2 **Inclusive Language for Subtle Exclusion**

I perceive language as indicative of value systems. The rhetoric that integrated dance companies use has the potential to minimize political engagement with the systemic injustice that keeps disabled people and non-normative bodies<sup>3</sup> out of the dance world. Missions and taglines encouraging unity and togetherness between disabled and non-disabled people—such as “We believe in a creative process based in equality,” “The Art of Being Together,” (DanceAbility International) and “A unifying expression of movement for all” (Dancing Wheels)—seek to find sameness between disability and non-disability, creating the idyllic meaning that all people are equal on the dance floor. The rhetoric side-steps the lived realities of structural issues that keep

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<sup>3</sup> This is an opportunity for me to talk about the shared experience of exclusion in mainstream dance of people of color, queer people, fat people, and disabled people, and the politics of exclusion through promotion of hegemonic body types, appearances, and movement ranges.

disabled people from full participation and citizenship; it lacks the critical lens about systems that exclude disabled people from being truly equal leaders in mainstream dance fields and from receiving professional critique. I posit that there is limited value in re-inserting disabled dancers into non-disabled forms that have never before made room for disability.

I argue that the inclusion approach, in its rhetoric and aesthetic, inserts the disabled dancer into a narrative of normalization. In the process, the approach reifies other hegemonic norms, such as heterosexuality, beauty standards, and standards of strength. The inclusion approach also uses disability as a teaching tool for non-disabled audiences to learn and adjust their expectations of what disabled people can do, and who can participate in dance and performance. There is a lack of opportunities for amateur disabled artists to explore work that goes beyond this model of inclusion, to incubate work with other disabled artists, and to explore content related to politicized Disability identity because almost all opportunities for disabled artists fall into this model.

I use the concept of “politicization” in this thesis to refer to internal ideology, as opposed to external politics and affiliations. The process of engaging with disability identity in a politicized way is to identify with disabled people as a minority group and social identity, thus facilitating engagement with the sociopolitical experiences of oppression. I explore and analyze more politicized manifestations of Disability in dance and performance in Chapters 3 and 4, “The Push Against,” and “The Pull Toward.”

Similarly, in this project, I primarily use Carrie Sandahl’s (2003) definition of “crip” as articulated in “Queering the Crip or Crippling the Queer.” “Crip” does not express the desire for inclusion and to be normalized, but pride and value in difference. For Sandahl, crip art reflects this politicization of identity. She also develops “crip” as a verb, which expresses the state of

becoming crip. I use this term to discuss the way that we, as artists as community builders, use crip lenses to alter spaces and art for accessibility and welcome. Eli Clare (1999), Tobin Siebers (2005), and Robert McRuer (2006) have also worked to articulate “crip” as an identifier. I discuss more specifics of “crip” in Chapter 4, “The Pull Toward,” which focuses on the articulation and development of crip aesthetics.

### 1.3 **The Importance of Crip Spaces**

Crip aesthetics do not solely involve content and technique, but also spatial arrangement and power systems. I argue that making crip art includes creating spaces that are accessible for disabled people to attend, as well as accessible through the hierarchy of involvement. In a qualitative study, Carol J. Gill and Carrie Sandahl (2009), cite access as a barrier for disabled artists to both have careers in the arts and as well as to attending art events and venues (21).

Therefore, crip aesthetics are not simply about the content of the art, but rather, the experience of the performance by the performers, the other participants (interpreters, directors, administrators), and the audience. Taking on a crip aesthetic means agreeing to forfeit certain standards of “professionalism.” Or rather, “professional” in a crip aesthetic incorporates the need for various kinds of accessibility and spatial remodeling. Insisting on full house lights out and shutting doors, for instance, can be inaccessible and suggests that regardless of intention, a performance may not be prepared for or welcoming to a crip audience. I discuss the ways that my vision for crip art includes space, power, content, performers and experience in Chapter 4, “The Pull Toward.”

#### 1.4 Cultural Location

Although I address events that came before it, such as the founding of Cleveland Dancing Wheels and integrated contact improvisation experiments, my timeframe of focus begins in 1995, the year that the University of Michigan held *This/Ability: An Interdisciplinary Conference on Disability and the Arts*. At this conference, Paul Longmore presented a keynote lecture about the role of disability culture in the Disability movement. This lecture became the chapter called “The Second Phase: From Disability Rights to Disability Culture” in *Why I Burned My Book and Other Essays on Disability* (2003). Longmore’s piece summarizes the accomplishments and characteristics of the first phase of the Disability Rights Movement, a phase he characterized as rights-based, and called that the movement enter the “Quest for collective identity” (215) through disability culture. Disabled artists and scholars discussed art and culture as well as performed and presented at this conference, and video clips from this event were later compiled into David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder’s pivotal documentary about disability Culture, *Vital Signs: Crip Culture Talks Back* (1995). Ideas and energy were converging around disability culture at this pivotal point, and I use this moment to analyze the path that Disability art has taken since then.

Carol Gill also published her article “A Psychological View of Disability Culture” in 1995. Gill’s piece theorized the importance and function of disability culture and articulated its core values. In her piece, she recognized values such as humor, acceptance of difference, communication, and creative approaches as central to disability culture. I identify some of these values and claim them as crip culture as well, with the qualifier that crip culture can be sharper and more unapologetic. Both Longmore’s and Gill’s essays define disability culture in its core values and functions, call for a shift in the Disability Movement, and articulate a vision for this

shift from disability *rights* to disability *culture*. My work focuses on the role of dance and performance as a subset of Disability art and culture. I recognize the values of disability culture and crip culture that have been missing from many of these integrated dance forms, and propose opportunities for incorporating and embodying these cultural values in dance and performance art.

The Ann Arbor conference showcased several performance pieces by Cheryl Marie Wade, a pioneer in disability arts and culture. Her poems, “I’m not One of The,” and “Cripple Lullabye,” came out in her 1993 anthology, *Range of Motion: An Anthology of Disability Poetry, Prose and Art*, which brought together the work of disabled artists across multiple artistic media.<sup>4</sup> An elder of disability culture, Wade also founded Wry Crips, a performance group for disabled women artists. There, she began working with Judith Smith and Corbett O’Toole, early participants and dancers active in the founding of AXIS Dance Company.<sup>5</sup> Several other integrated dance companies, such as Candoco (UK, 1991) and Dance>Detour (1995) emerged at this time as well.<sup>6</sup> I look at the founding texts of AXIS Dance, an integrated company, and analyze how it compares to some of its contemporary work in disability culture.

The culmination of the Ann Arbor conference, *Vital Signs*, Paul Longmore’s keynote, Cheryl Marie Wade’s work, Carol Gill’s essay, and the founding of various integrated dance companies at this time and in the decade prior, provide a logical point for studying the emergence of crip art within disability art and culture. The cultural atmosphere in this moment

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<sup>4</sup> These poems were turned into a documentary in 2003 called “Disability Culture Rap,” which functions as a disability cultural artifact, containing video footage and photos from the Disability Rights Movement, as well as Wade herself performing her poem.

<sup>5</sup> Wade is an example of one of the people who was involved in both in integrated dance and Disability culture, and so provides a bridge between two artistic approaches.

<sup>6</sup> Cleveland Dancing Wheels was founded by Mary Verdi-Fletcher in 1980, so it was already established by this time period. I will use Cleveland Dancing Wheels as one of my primary examples of the inclusion approach.

was rich in ideas about culture, and included disabled artist leadership in the development of new art and articulation of ideas about aesthetics, purpose, and value of art originating from Disabled cultural identity. I will look at what values in the mid-1990s were present in the disability arts scene and how ideas, aesthetics, and performance have shifted over time.

### 1.5 **Theorizing Performance: Literature Review/Genealogy and Contributions**

Disability artists and scholars have subsequently taken up different aspects of Disability art and culture to center their focus, though I will focus specifically on integrated dance, disability performance art, and crip art. Ann Cooper Albright was among the first scholars to produce scholarship and technique to integrate dance. Her work critically engages with accommodation and the expansion of dance forms to non-normative dances. In her work *Choreographing Difference* (1997), she outlines ways to choreograph and imagine disability in dance, and identified some of some of the work that was already happening. Her approach is intersectional and feminist in nature and includes issues of gender, race, and sexuality. Her more recent work, such as *Engaging Bodies* (2011) continues this work. Like Albright's work, my own work emphasizes the importance of intersectionality in dance and performance. That said, I ultimately call for more creation of non-integrated dance and performance forms, while Albright looks for possibilities in integrated forms. I will use her analysis about some of the work of DanceAbility, AXIS Dance, and Candoco, as secondary texts that will shape my own analyses.

Petra Kuppers takes a related perspective as a feminist and artist scholar of dance and performance, and published *Disability Culture and Community* (2011) and *Somatic Engagement* (2009), along with several articles exploring community performance and her community of praxis, the Olimpias Performance Project. Her work is community-based and intersectional, and explores multi-media performance and collaboration across geographical boundaries. Her

continued commitment to access and intersectional identity, is central to the continued development of crip aesthetics, I feature many of these ideas in my fourth chapter, “The Pull Toward: Emerging crip aesthetics from Our Own Bodyminds.”

Philip Auslander and Carrie Sandahl’s anthology *Bodies in Commotion* (2005) brings together theoretical work related to disability and performance, as well as specific readings of disability art pieces. The anthology is intersectional and interdisciplinary in its scope. Several pieces from this book will be important in conceptualizing disability aesthetics in dance and performance, specifically Owen Smith’s “Shifting Apollo’s Frame: Challenging the Body Aesthetic in Theater Dance,” which talks about the founding of Candoco and the process of gaining visibility and renown. This piece illustrates a tendency of the companies associated with the integrated dance scene in the 1990s to veer away from the therapeutic or disability-centric categorization and rather align themselves with professional dance companies. Using Smith’s article as a secondary text, I draw parallels between Candoco and concurrent movement by other integrated dance companies to create an inclusive dance atmosphere. I will argue that, ultimately, pulling away from the label of “disability arts” asks the audience to “look past” disability, which ultimately minimizes our range of experiences.

Corbett O’Toole’s new memoir, *Fading Scars: My Queer Disability History* introduces an alternate history of the creation of AXIS Dance. A first-hand account, O’Toole’s history is a primary source that presents a more in-depth and complex history to the dominant narrative, or “creation myth” associated with integrated dance companies of this time. It stands to reason that the actual founding of all of these integrated dance groups were more complex than they are portrayed, and that there are other alternate histories similar to O’Toole’s that have not been recorded. However, the way that these myths have been incorporated into the general discourse,

regardless of potential simplification or inaccuracy, informs the way that artists, critics, and audiences think about these companies, as well as contributes to the persistent rhetoric of inclusion.

*Contact Quarterly*, a contact improvisational journal, published several articles exploring the possibility of disability in the scene of contact improvisation in the 1980s, which in turn influenced the inclusion of disabled people in the form. Contact improvisation is an improvisational dance form that originated in the United States in the early 1970s. In her contact improvisation ethnography, *Sharing the Dance*, Cynthia J. Novack (1990) describes the form as a, “Physical dialogue of two dancers, the action which results from the sensations of touch and weight” (11). The form reflects cultural values of the 1970s about community and equality, and although it can be made accessible to a wide variety of people, its original form was developed by non-disabled dancers. The documentary film, *Common Ground: Dance and Disability* (1990), complements this scholarship by showing an early exploration of the inclusion of disabled dancers in contact improvisation by a few of the dancers who would later develop the form that became “DanceAbility.” These sources are important references in understanding the connection to the greater contemporary dance scene, although Contact Improvisation was considered a “fringe” scene at the time. It is important to consider Alito Alessi’s connection to the early contact improvisation integrated dance work, as is shown in *Common Ground*, when analyzing the development of DanceAbility.<sup>7</sup>

There are few sources that are critical of any of the work about integrated dance or the incorporation of disabled dancers into a previously non-disabled dominated dance scene, but I

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<sup>7</sup> Originally a part of Joint Forces Dance Company, later to be called “DanceAbility.”

intend to fill some of these gaps. I also am conscious of the body of literature about the use of disability to enrich the dance scene, which, though relevant, I will not echo.

My theoretical orientation will use intersectional works that explore the connections between crip and queer community, such as Alison Kafer's *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (2013), Robert McRuer's *Crip Theory* (2006), Carrie Sandahl's "Queering the Crip or Crippling the Queer" (2003) and Tobin Siebers's *Disability Theory* (2008). These pieces blur the lines between queer and crip community and values, and demonstrate the ways that queer and crip existence are inextricably intertwined. They explore concepts such as orientation to the concept of time, relationship to the mainstream and to art, and community formation, and introduce complex ways to approach disability artistically. I will use this work to address parallels and argue that, in the crippling of dance and performance, we are simultaneously queering the form. I will use this as an opportunity to talk about the danger in using hegemonic representation and denying identity politics in art.

## 1.6 **Methodology**

I take a disability studies approach to the critical analysis of texts, videos, and representation through considering embedded narratives, rhetoric, and technique pertaining to disability, dance, and performance. I draw information not just about the art, but also the rhetoric around the art and companies, treating discourse<sup>8</sup> from interviews, websites, promotional materials, and videos of actual performance pieces as primary sources and texts that produce meaning about the function and significance of disability, disability identity and communities, and dance. I have noticed that the same rhetoric that was used at the advent of integrated dance

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<sup>8</sup> I am using the term "discourse" to mean the constellation of information that create meaning around disability and dance. This may incorporate company mission/vision statements, interviews with artists, press coverage, and performance materials.

still persists today, and comes at the cost of the possibility of crip aesthetics. Therefore, I do close readings of the rhetoric in both my primary and secondary sources. My secondary sources consist of reviews of dance and performance pieces found through academic databases, dance journals, and online searches. In many cases, reviews and interviews are linked as promotional material on dance and performance company websites. These texts primarily analyze the work and the companies from an art perspective. To balance this, I also use several texts that analyze the presence of disability in dance and performance through a disability studies lens. I find these secondary sources to be critical to understanding the way that integrated dance is perceived, both by disability studies scholars and by art critics, and helpful in capturing the way that rhetoric generated by the companies transfers to critics and scholars. In a social science project, I might interview some of the integrated dance pioneers myself in order to learn about their intentions or find the “true stories” of these dance companies. Although this would be an interesting project, I instead use critical analysis to find patterns in the rhetoric that can help create connections between the history of integrated dance and the current landscape.

Although this is an academic thesis, I am informed also by praxis and my own queer and crip identity and lived experience. I am a part of queer and crip communities, the dance community, and the field of disability studies. I am also an active participant in the contact improvisation community in Chicago and the midwest and often attend region-wide gatherings, workshops, and collaborations, as well as the weekly contact improvisation jam in Chicago. With this group, I have worked with themes such as communication, negotiation of boundaries, consent, and access, and have fostered ongoing dialogue around these themes.

In addition, I attended a four-week Teacher Certification in the DanceAbility method in the Summer of 2015 in Helsinki, Finland. The course was led by contemporary dance teacher,

choreographer, and creator of the DanceAbility Method, Alito Alessi. My experience of the teacher certification informed some of my work on integrated dance, and I share these at various points throughout the piece. I also attended a short intensive with integrated dance company Full Radius Dance in August 2016 that I do not discuss explicitly in this piece, but which nonetheless informs my experience and perspective. I have also collaborated with Chicago-based disabled dancer Kris Lenzo on creating a dance piece that explored possibilities for expressing disability in improvisation and performance. Throughout all of these experiences, I have noted themes that continuously emerged pertaining to disability, dance, and integration. I merge some of these praxis-born theory with academic-based theory to support the arguments that I will make in my thesis.<sup>9</sup> Thus, this thesis is informed by my experience, and uses some vignettes from personal experiences that encapsulate concepts I have written, but will not be about my experiences.

Throughout my work, I take up Kafer's method of asking questions that she describes in *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. Kafer perceives disability as, "A site of questions rather than firm definitions" (11). Thus, it is important to raise questions about disability to further describe and analyze phenomena, rather than to rigidly define it. Rigid definitions have often commodified disabled people, and so asking questions to encourage fluidity functions as a means of restructuring power and embracing the instability and ever-changing nature of crip art and identity. As Kafer writes in *Feminist Queer Crip*:

The very fact that so much energy is funneled into defining disability and impairment suggests the fundamental instability of the terms. Moreover, the desire for fixed definitions cannot be divorced from the economic effects of such fixing...In contrast, the disability theory and politics that I develop in these pages do not rely on a fixed definition

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<sup>9</sup> These vignettes are found in my second chapter and the conclusion.

of “disability” and “disabled person” but recognize the parameters of both terms as always open to debate. (11)

Thus, this technique of raising questions instead of manufacturing fixed answers defies desires of the government and social services, as well as other institutions, and leaves room for more participation in the conversation, as well as space for our definitions to develop and shift. Likewise, Carrie Sandahl (2016) challenges her students to find the “representational conundrums” as a pedagogical technique to focus our attention on the places where artists need to intervene and experiment. This also serves to redistribute power and give students space to raise questions and recognize areas where the work is unfinished. These representational conundrums indicate the spaces in art where there is not an easy answer, and where we need to dig deeper. I gesture to these representational conundrums by posing questions throughout this thesis.

### 1.7 **Outline of Chapters**

The middle three chapters in my thesis demonstrate the various orbits of representations of disability in dance and performance. Though these orbits build upon one another and intersect, they all contain histories and overlap in their participants, form, and execution. I do not see manifestations of disability in dance as a linear trajectory through which each dance company and form evolves, but I do see potential for certain dance expression to separate out from a model of inclusion and integration, and toward one of disability pride and crip aesthetics. Thus, I will propose a vision for the future of crip dance at the end of my thesis. After this introduction, there is Chapter 2, “‘The Art of Being Together’: A Critical History of Integrated Dance.” I briefly lay out the way that integrated dance emerged out of the contemporary dance scene, and what has happened in the field and in the form for the last several decades. I examine the rhetoric,

technique, and leadership of many of these groups, using DanceAbility, Cleveland Dancing Wheels, AXIS Dance, and Candoco, all integrated dance companies, as case studies to ground my research. I discuss the way that these forms have often not been understood as “professional” dance despite their efforts to be a part of the mainstream dance world, and so have been outside of the realm of critique. I do not restrict my history to the professional dance scene, but instead consciously think about the dance world in recreational, professional, and social terms, noting figurative tropes and rhetorical barriers that obstruct a more political crip aesthetic.

My third chapter is “The Push Against: Disability Performance as Counterculture.” Here, I shift from dance into performance art to explore forms of disability representation that have emerged as a way to resist dominant culture. These forms are expressions of disability in performance that both reference ableism, and are in opposition to it. I call this the Countercultural Approach. I analyze intersectional responses to the mainstream by using Sins Invalid as the main example. The group has worked together to resist hegemonic oppression and build coalition among marginalized groups.

The fourth chapter is called “The Pull Toward: Emerging Crip Aesthetics from Our Own Bodyminds.” Although the vast majority of integrated dance and disability performance fall into the categories in my first two chapters (inclusion and counterculture), there is an emerging movement of disabled artists creating art that does not specifically address dominant culture, but rather uses crip aesthetics to influence a dance form that comes from within the disabled body and mind. These works do not mimic non-disabled forms, nor rail against the norm. Intersectionality, multi-media work, the blurring of boundaries, and the attention to access, power, and space characterize this aesthetic. There exists little rhetoric surrounding this approach, so part of my task is to articulate the contours that define these pieces and visions. I

use Petra Kupperts's and Bob Flanagan's performance work as main examples, and also use experiences from *Bodies of Work* to articulate some of the processes behind crip aesthetics.

The conclusion, "Reaching Forward: A Vision for Crippling Performance" recognizes the emancipatory elements of this third form of disability representation and calls to use it as a tool for articulating and embracing intersections between excluded groups. I will recognize that within it lies a dance form that embraces the disabled bodymind, and I will articulate steps that I think are necessary to make this a more widely-expressed form of Disability art.

## 2. “THE ART OF BEING TOGETHER”:

### A CRITICAL HISTORY OF INTEGRATED DANCE

The study of integrated dance is a study of inclusion. Artists and activists, many of whom were active in the Disability Rights Movement, participated in the initial creation of integrated dance groups in the 1980s and 1990s. Performance artists and dancers experimented in this inclusive form that at its roots encouraged the collaboration of disabled and non-disabled people. The companies were and remain committed to creating change through demonstrating the artistry and talent of disabled artists, and through it, educating and exposing the mainstream to new art. From one vantage point, the beginning of integrated dance mirrors the fight for inclusion in the Disability Rights Movement. Integrated dance has activist roots in both its founding and ties to the Disability Rights Movement, but the creative choices, discourse, and power structure of the integrated dance companies create relatively less political charge. This chapter analyzes the structures and discourse around integrated dance and the meaning it creates.

Cleveland Dancing Wheels, AXIS Dance Company, DanceAbility, and Candoco<sup>10</sup> serve as case studies for integrated dance work that came up in the late 1980s and early 90s and continue to produce work in the present. Attempting to reach the public through workshops and performance, these nationally- and internationally-renowned companies are similar in their missions and value systems, rhetoric, form, leadership, and the criticism that they receive.

Integrated dance takes up a variety of dance techniques, ranging from modern and improvisation to ballet. Therefore, it is important to note that integrated dance is not a technique

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<sup>10</sup> Because of its UK location and the particular condition of disability arts and funding in the UK, CanDoCo is different than integrated dance in the United States. That said, they emerged around the same time as AXIS, Cleveland Dancing Wheels, DanceAbility, and other integrated dance companies around that time, and so are bound into a similar discourse. Though I recognize this difference, I will use their work as a part of the genesis narrative of these integrated dance companies.

in itself, but instead a descriptor of who is involved in the form and a placement of value on the inclusion of disabled people. That said, there are similar aesthetics and repeating tropes that span across companies, which I address later in this chapter. Integrated dance exists worldwide, but the bulk of my research is surrounding integrated dance companies in the US, with the exception of Candoco, a UK-based integrated dance company. I use Candoco as an example because its founding story is analogous to several US-based integrated dance companies and has been analyzed through a disability studies lens in *Bodies in Commotion* (2005).

In this chapter, I notice trends and tropes across integrated dance companies in the constellation of texts surrounding them and the larger sociopolitical structures they maintain. Taking up a politic of social liberalism, these companies seek to include disabled people, while still fitting into normative ideas of success, power, dance, and the body. Integrated dance focuses on the cooperation of both disabled and non-disabled people as well as proximity to and engagement with the mainstream. I call this approach the “liberal inclusion approach,” and argue that the focus on togetherness and goal to be accepted into the mainstream professional dance scene simplified the disability experience and depoliticized the companies.

In this context, I understand depoliticization to be marked by neglecting to view the disability experience as sociopolitical, and instead positioning disability as a barrier to be solved through fixing the built environment and societal attitudes. Using the main examples of these integrated dance companies, I provide a discourse analysis of the formational rhetoric, artistic content, interviews, leadership, and history that create this meaning.<sup>11</sup> I begin by discussing the

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<sup>11</sup> I am aware that I rarely analyze the performance pieces themselves in this chapter. Integrated dance has been around for several decades and spans a wide range of genre and content. To use any one (or several) pieces to depict integrated dance would be reductive and inaccurate. That said, I describe a couple pieces or scenes at various points in the chapter to describe the embodiment of certain tropes and values.

cultural moment in which these groups were forming and some of the cultural factors that influenced them and their self-representation. I then discuss the role of professionalism in the groups and corresponding paradoxes laden within it. I also discuss the rhetoric of togetherness and breaking of barriers broadly, as well as power structures and technique and how they create meaning within the form.

## 2.1 **Cultural Location**

Integrated dance's liberal inclusion model was shaped by its cultural context and developed in conversation with it. Integrated dance began in the late 1980s, but gained momentum in the 1990s, at a time of culmination for multiple art-based movements. As I explained in the introduction, artists and academics in the disability community gathered at *This/Ability: An Interdisciplinary Conference on Disability and the Arts* at this time to share work and define art within the field. This was where Paul Longmore passed the torch of the Disability Rights Movement to Disability Culture, challenging artists to become key players in the movement. Although the liberal inclusion model was developing adjacent to disability arts, and shared several people who participated in both, integrated dance made a concerted effort to mark themselves distinct as from disability arts (Smith 73).<sup>12</sup>

This time period is also marked by Bill T. Jones's 1994 work "Still/Here," a performance piece that worked with terminally ill individuals, creating narratives around their stories. These stories were put to movement, and then performed. Although not explicitly Disability Art, the piece explored the experiences of terminally ill patients, using lived experiences of disability to construct narratives about the intersectional experiences of these individuals, many of whom were living with HIV/AIDS. Although Jones was highly celebrated in some ways, earning him

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<sup>12</sup> I will explain this strategic move and what it signifies later in the chapter.

the highly acclaimed McArthur Genius award in 1994, he was met with pushback from critics. Jones's work was pivotal because it challenged mainstream notions of whose story should be told and who can participate in art, as well as the standards an audience experience. Critic Arlene Croce's iconic "Discussing the Undiscussable" is the epitome of such pushback. In her criticism, Croce adamantly refuses to attend the performance, but nonetheless critiques it. She describes Bill T. Jones's pivotal work "Still/Here" as "intolerably voyeuristic," (Croce 20), and argues that art that uses the subject as "victims," is "a menace to all art forms" (22). Croce's work was polarizing and although it was not widely accepted and appreciated, it largely influenced the landscape of art at this time.

Integrated dance groups like Candoco, AXIS Dance Company, Cleveland Dancing Wheels, and DanceAbility pursued a different path than the one taken by Jones and his company.<sup>13</sup> Croce writes, "By working dying people into his act, Jones is putting himself beyond the reach of criticism" (20). Her pivotal work calls into question what kind of art can be critiqued and who can be viewed as professional. Jones's work, which blurred the lines between disability and illness, as well as addressed queerness and issues of class, was considered highly political. Croce continues, "I can't review someone I feel sorry for or hopeless about" and "the strategies of victim artists are proliferating marvelously at the moment" (22). She does not call into question why she feels sorry and what issues might be there, but rather suggests that not only are these forms outside of the realm of critique, but they are "anti-art" (24). The critique and public controversy about it acted as a warning for the kind of criticism companies could potentially face through exploring such vulnerable topics as disability, illness, race, and queerness, and is

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<sup>13</sup> It should be noted, however, that AXIS Dance Company commissioned Jones as a choreographer in 2000.

indicative of the experimental and uncertain time when critics and artists were thinking about who can be a dancer, and what narratives are worthy of performance.

Croce's piece was written at a time that integrated dance companies were still new to the scene, and were defining themselves. This criticism may have played a role in influencing companies such as Candoco and AXIS Dance, who explicitly stated that they were not making performances about disability, and wanted to be considered and critiqued as professionals in the field.<sup>14</sup> Croce writes about "Still/Here" as a part of a larger trend of "victim art" that capitalizes on oppression (27). These critiques likely struck a chord with integrated dance groups that were in their experimental phases, and encouraged them to define their form and subject material so as not to automatically be dismissed as "victim art."

Although there was a great outcry against Croce both directly after the critique came out, and many years later (Oates; So), her work reverberated throughout the scene of dance criticism, and veteran critics questioned the validity and integrity of these companies. Critics such as Michael Scott appropriated Croce's term "victim art" five years later in an article called "Is Disabled Dance Only Victim Art?" about Candoco's work (Scott), and continued to challenge the validity of the company in an article published only three days later, called, "CanDoCo Unable to Impress." This pattern demonstrates the way that critique perpetuated certain rhetoric associated with integrated dance. As critics called into question who can be on stage and under what objective, as well as the ethics of performing disability, inclusion groups were simultaneously engaging in a process of self-making, carving out who they were, as well as who they were not. Croce's polarizing work limited the way artists of the time could define themselves.

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<sup>14</sup> To be discussed in the next section, "Earning the Badge."

## 2.2 Earning the Badge: Professionalism in the Inclusion Approach

Through marshalling themselves as professional and using the same markers of professionalism in their own work that is expected of contemporary dance companies, Cleveland Dancing Wheels,<sup>15</sup> AXIS Dance Company, and Candoco Dance Company emerged onto the integrated dance scene in 1980, 1987, and 1991 respectively. Through their rhetoric and their insistence on their professionalism, leaders in this field positioned their companies as contemporary dance companies instead of disability arts (Smith; Ali), resisting the almost automatic categorization into disability arts simply due to the presence of disabled dancers in the companies.

Judith Smith, artistic director of AXIS Dance shared her thoughts about the importance of considering content, so as to maintain “professional” status in the mainstream contemporary dance world. In a 2010 interview on the *Lincoln Journal Star*, she stated, “We didn’t want to do pieces about disability. We’re not a wheelchair dance company or a disabled dance company. We are a contemporary repertory company...we have set the standard for physically integrated dance” (Korbelik). This distancing from disability-related content and disability-only art, reported in 2010, echoes similar sentiments in other dance companies.

Candoco, a London-based internationally renowned integrated dance company emerged out of the Aspire Center for Spinal Injury’s integrated workshops in 1991. At its founding, the site says, “Celeste’s [co-founder and artistic director] priority was that Candoco should be programmed and judged as a dance company, not a therapeutic project” (Candoco Dance Company). In the 16 years that Celeste Dandeker served as artistic director, she commissioned

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<sup>15</sup> In 1990, Cleveland Dancing Wheels joined the Cleveland Ballet and functioned within this partnership for about ten years, before separating. During this time, they were called Cleveland Ballet Dancing Wheels (Dancing Wheels About Us).

acclaimed choreographers, mainly non-disabled, to choreograph pieces for the company.

Candoco attributes its success and participation in the mainstream dance world to this “ambitious commissioning strategy” (Candoco Dance Company).

Candoco’s founding story, and the similar stories of integrated dance companies gaining acclaim in the early 1990s, is a strong reminder that disability arts and professionalism are often implied to be mutually exclusive. This perceived threat of being considered to be “disability arts” (Smith) and implicitly unprofessional, foregrounds the work and has undoubtedly informed the way that these groups take up technique and dictate who they take on as company members and choreographers.<sup>16</sup>

That said, not all of these groups abandoned disability art. In her book *Fading Scars* (2015), Corbett O’Toole tells a little-known story about the founding of AXIS Dance Company that complicates the standard narrative that is publicly told about AXIS. O’Toole traces the way that the company started as a community project: an opportunity for a disabled artist, Patty Overland, to tell her story through movement. Overland enlisted fellow members O’Toole and Cheryl Wade from the activist group Wry Crips to help her create and direct it. O’Toole discusses their commitment to maintain disabled leadership, to create a narrative *about* disability, to feature disabled dancers. She cites the paucity of professional disabled dancers as one of the more difficult aspects of the process, and the challenges they encountered in trying to center disabled dancers. For example, when non-disabled dancers participated, they danced behind a screen in an effort to center the disabled dancers (141). Judith Smith and Bonnie Lewkowicz began participating as wheelchair dancers. Through this, a group that originally began for a

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<sup>16</sup> Similar to the move away from disability arts, groups such as DanceAbility also distanced themselves from therapeutic models of dance.

single community-based project, eventually transitioned into AXIS Dance. This demonstrates the movement of this group from identifying as activist and disability-centric to embracing more of a professional artistic.

In an essay entitled, “Shifting Apollo’s Frame: Challenging the Body Aesthetic in Theater Dance,” Owen Smith analyzes the narrative of the genesis of Candoco dance company, looking to the way that they strategically positioned themselves as a dance company. He explains that, “They consciously resisted the ‘disability dance’ label, thereby questioning historically and socially constructed boundaries that attempted to define and secure what had been considered aesthetically acceptable by dominant social and cultural hegemonies” (73). He continues to write about the professionalism of the company and the training that dancers undergo affirm their professional status in order to be a part of the company. Smith claims that this resistance to the label of disability arts was unique to Candoco, but I argue that this tactic is actually common among integrated dance companies that emerged around this same time. Given the cultural atmosphere of the emergence of disability arts and the controversy of work like *Still/Here*, in the United States, it was necessary for groups to explicitly define their place within the culture and make their work decidedly separate. However, in doing so, they drew stark lines where such separations may have otherwise not been mutually exclusive.<sup>17</sup>

Cleveland Dancing Wheels took a similar approach, which is evident in the founding texts of the company. Their mission states, “Each of our team members shares a heartfelt commitment to...instill greater understanding and professionalism in individuals of all ability levels” (Dancing Wheels). Simultaneously, though, they distance themselves from being

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<sup>17</sup> The cultural context for the UK is different, but the focus on the social model remains the same. The focus on inclusion as a removing of attitudinal and environmental barriers created a idyllic idea of unity, and the idea that disability does not exist in the absence of these barriers. This detracts from a focus on disability, which is essential to disability arts.

“disabled artists.” This parallel distancing from disability arts follows the pattern of many integrated dance companies: by fitting themselves into an inclusion model and distancing themselves from creating art *about* disability and with disability in mind, they inadvertently reinforce the same (often ableist) expectations that have created barriers to their own participation. Smith writes of Candoco, “Their vision, to reinterpret dance in order to widen potential ownership of the art form, demanded that both non- and disabled people explore, work, and dance together: this would not happen if they were segregated within the category of disability arts” (74). Claiming professionalism instead of disability arts, as well as presupposing that the two categories are mutually exclusive, simultaneously distances the company from disability arts and also asserts that disability dance is not professional.

Issues around disability disclosure expose similar practicing of distancing the inclusion groups in order to reach professional status. Founder of the first integrated dance company in the US, Mary Verdi-Fletcher is known as a pioneer in integrated dance. The 1996 article “Cleveland Ballet Gets its Wheels” tells the story of Verdi-Fletcher’s entry in a dance competition with a non-disabled dance partner, David Brewster. She did not disclose her disability in her application, but when she performed, the audience was shocked to see that she was visibly disabled. Her choice not to disclose her disability was a strategic professional move. As the piece continued, the audience responded positively and enthusiastically. Fueled by this affirmation, Verdi-Fletcher began Cleveland Dancing Wheels in 1980. Cleveland Dancing Wheels still holds the importance of breaking down barriers and challenging assumptions held by the mainstream (CBS News). What is lost in disability empowerment when we separate ourselves from our identities and from creating work about it? As disabled artists whose disabled embodiment and em-mindedment is in the art that we create, what does it mean to distance ourselves from

disability, and is it even possible? Why does it matter that disabled people are involved if the subject of disability is avoided? How do they both acknowledge disability and simultaneously ignore it?

I do not seek to answer these questions, but rather situate them appropriately in their cultural context. These questions resound differently in each time period. Paralleling the Disability Rights Movement (DRM), it makes sense culturally and contextually that inclusion and a desire to be present in the mainstream would be reflected in integrated arts in the 1980s and 1990s. In early years of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), inclusion was, in many ways an end goal. However, several decades later, this liberal inclusion approach in dance has remained stable, while the ideology of the DRM has shifted. In the chapter “Feminist Theory, the Body, and the Disabled Figure” of *Extraordinary Bodies*, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (1997) discusses the difference between strategic constructionism and strategic essentialism, as two ways to situate the disabled body. Her juxtaposition of strategic constructionism and strategic essentialism reflect these two ways of thinking about disability and the disabled agent. She writes:

Both constructionism and essentialism, then, are theoretical strategies—framings of the body—invoked for specific ends, such as psychologically liberating people whose bodies have been defined as defective or facilitating imagined communities from which positive identities can emerge. Strategic constructionism destigmatizes the disabled body, makes difference relative, denaturalizes so-called normalcy, and challenges appearance hierarchies. Strategic essentialism, by contrast, validates individual experience and consciousness, imagines community, authorizes history, and facilitates self-naming. The identity "disabled" operates in this mode as a pragmatic narrative, what Susan Bordo calls

"a life-enhancing fiction" that places the reality of individual bodies and perspectives within specific social and historical contexts. (23)

Garland-Thomson's theory provides a framework for considering the cultural context and the different ways of considering disability. The liberal inclusion model most closely relates to a strategic constructionism approach, in which the disabled body is normalized through viewing bodily difference as a social construction. A more radical approach, I would argue, is one of strategic essentialism, which I will discuss in the next two chapters.

A part of the reconciling happens through the dual commitment to education—both to dancers, and to non-disabled audiences. DanceAbility, AXIS Dance, and Cleveland Dancing Wheels all have amateur educational branches and community classes which welcome non-disabled and disabled amateur students. Keeping the educational branch separate from the performance branch is important to maintaining this professionalism. In his DanceAbility teacher training that I attended in July of 2015, Alito Alessi explains that in mixed ability work, the standard is higher, because an audience from the general public does not expect integrated dance to be professional. He explains that you have to compensate for this and “make killer work” because of it. To navigate the need to work with a range of performance abilities, he creates staged performances in more formal settings, instead of exclusively creating informal street parades and workshops, saying, “I believe that the front end of contemporary dance is mixed ability dance and so it's important that we do performances to bring us to that rung.” This stark distinction between education and performance shows the disjuncture in integrated dance, and the conflict that all of these groups grapple with: how do integrated companies who took this liberal inclusion approach reconcile both the supposed commitment to bettering the condition of disabled people and the simultaneous distancing from them? Although education is part their

answer, there is still dissonance. The following section explores the paradoxes laden in these claims.

### 2.3 **The Paradox of Professionalism**

Despite the fierce commitment to professionalism, these liberal inclusion groups exhibit paradoxes within their surrounding texts. For example, Candoco's website and promotional materials play into generic inspiration narratives. Their website describes themselves, saying, "Candoco is a charitable organisation that is a source of inspiration, support, and innovation" (Candoco background).<sup>18</sup> This mission of providing support and inspiration seems contradictory because of their simultaneous statements of professionalism. This apparent contradiction is an example of the tension between their desire to be separate from disability arts and the disability narratives that they still fall into. The idea of charity and inspiration assumes a non-disabled patron, which not only constructs meaning about who patrons of dance companies are, but also asserts to whom disabled artists must present. There is a tension in the way that Candoco desires to be considered as "any other contemporary dance company" (74), when they also state, "We are curious about what dance can be, how we can provide new ways into dance and how our company of disabled and non-disabled dancers can change and reimagine perceptions of ability" (Machado and Nilsen). These goals express a simultaneous desire to change social constructs and oppressive structures, while nonetheless striving towards "normal" through reaching for professional standards in the mainstream dance world. By "reimagining" perceptions of ability, do they seek to create a new normal or dismantle it altogether? Are there risks associated with

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<sup>18</sup> The term "charity" denotes what we in the US call "non-profits." In a US context, I may pick up on the rhetorical implication of calling a disability organization "charity," but this is not applicable to the UK where Candoco is located. That said, the use of "inspiration" as a characteristic of this dance company is still relevant and applicable.

simply recreating normal? What are the implications of truly seeing a company like Candoco as the same as a non-disabled company?

Similarly, Cleveland Dancing Wheels states that they seek to “instill greater understanding and professionalism,” and created a connection with the Cleveland Ballet, a mainstream group steeped in prestige in the early 1990s when other integrated dance companies were entering the scene. The 1999 article “Dancing Wheels” explains that Dancing Wheels “became the outreach and educational arm of the Cleveland Ballet,” holding workshops, lectures, demonstrations, and performances (CBS News). Their connection to ballet was a part of claiming professionalism, but what does it mean to be the “educational arm” of the Cleveland Ballet? Was their position equitable, and how did that function within their connection to professionalism? How does Cleveland Dancing Wheels “Provide successful, independent and creative role models for those with disabilities,” (Dancing Wheels) but forge connections with groups who enforce normative ideas of dance and beauty?

Despite their desire to differentiate themselves from disability arts and relate more closely to non-disabled professional dance companies, many of these integrated dance companies still performed in disability arts festivals that celebrated the work of disabled artists. The disability arts movement was growing in this time, and there was crossover between the two groups. This participation indicates a tension between the way that they rhetorically positioned themselves, and the more nuanced involvement in the arts.

#### 2.4 **The Issue of Authority: Power Dynamics in the Inclusion Approach**

In an era that dance critics used the measure of “victim art” (Croce; Scott) to describe integrated dance aesthetics, integrated dance companies often overcompensated in order to simply be taken seriously and viewed as professionals, and this often surfaced in their power

structures. Both AXIS Dance's website and reviews, in the *Lincoln Journal Star*, marks 1997, the 10-year anniversary of AXIS dance, and the year when Judith Smith became artistic director of the company, as a moment when AXIS began to improve its quality (Korbelik; AXIS Dance Company). This movement corresponded to the collaboration of renowned choreographers, such as Joe Goode and Stephen Petronio. This expansion in quality was meant to make AXIS a leader in the field, and to be widely recognized as a company worthy of the caliber of such directors. Looking at the demographics, these choreographers were widely non-disabled, and were already award-winning leaders in contemporary dance, and though this prestige-by-association brought AXIS positive feedback, this choice put great artistic power into non-disabled people. Artistic director Judith Smith draws attention to these artistic yet political choices, explaining that "AXIS' repertory is more sophisticated and technical, the kind of work one would expect from a professional dance group" (Korbelik).

Candoco underwent a similar professional revision through the participation of renowned choreographers. Responding to diminutive critique and the suggestion that Candoco was not dynamic, in "Shifting Apollo's Gaze," Smith writes about how the company hired renowned choreographer Javier de Frutos in an effort to showcase their capacity for avant garde work (82). This movement symbolizes an association with high powered individuals, inhabiting a more hegemonic identity through both non-disabled location and pre-existing professional status and involvement in the mainstream dance world.

Cleveland Dancing Wheels exhibits a similar pattern: by seeking out high-caliber non-disabled choreographers, and collaborating with the Cleveland Ballet, they attempted to push themselves into the dance world and maintain the goal that has been expressed from the beginning: to be considered professionals. Engaging connections with Guggenheim fellows and

other prestigious people such as Victoria Marks, Rosalind Newman, as well as with famous Russian ballet dancer Mikhail Baryshnikov (Male) as markers of mainstream contemporary dance success, artistic directors such as Smith, Verdi-Fletcher, Benjamin, and Dandeker strategically asserted their company's professionalism. These connections are highly valued, as they demonstrate a desired connection to the ballet world and contemporary dance scene, and assert their desire to enter into that scene in the art world. Media articles position these as opportunities for the choreographers to enrich their own work (Male).

DanceAbility navigated a different pathway to the professional destination. Alito Alessi, its founder, was already renowned at the time of the founding and involved in the mainstream dance world. He also experiences privilege through non-disabled male status, which contrasts with the other companies whose main leadership is female, both disabled and non-disabled. He received Choreographer's Fellowships from the American National Endowment for the Arts in 1992-1993 and 1995-1996 and a fellowship from the Oregon Arts Commission in 1991 (DanceAbility Artistic Director). Since then, he also received a Guggenheim in 2005 and a Fulbright in 2007, among numerous other honors, fellowships, and funding streams. Therefore, the pre-existing professional standing likely suggested that his art leadership is sanctioned and professionally acknowledged, and also gave Alessi great ability to garner support for Joint Forces Dance Company (the original group), and later DanceAbility in all of its incarnations. He has remained the director and in a position of power for DanceAbility's duration.

## 2.5 **Rhetoric: Illusions of Equality**

Language carries meaning, and the language used by integrated dance groups in their mission statements, promotional materials, and in interviews provides a first impression to the contemporary dance world and the general public. These integrated dance groups in the liberal

inclusion model used language that affirmed the unity of people with and without disabilities. Language can dictate who feels welcome in spaces, whether as an audience member, participant, or critic, as rhetoric creates meaning about disability and illuminates information about the approach that some of these groups take. Therefore, it is important to look to early rhetoric surrounding disability and dance through the discourse that was publicly available at this time.

Much of the language around inclusion, on surface level, seeks to find mutual relationship between disabled and non-disabled people. It acknowledges social model understanding that disability is a social construction (Oliver). Although this understanding takes the focus away from disability as tragic, disability studies scholars (Shakespeare and Watson; Siebers; Kafer) have critiqued it and shifted the focus to more of a sociopolitical understanding of disability that does not create a dichotomy between the social experience of disability and impairment, but a more nuanced understanding of the way that experiences of social oppression and impairment are inherently intertwined. US Disability Studies scholars have used this model and shifted it into more of a minority model approach recently. In *Keywords* (2015), Jeffrey A. Brune writes about the concept of “minority” in disability studies, explaining that, like in the social model, situating disability within the minority model, “explained why disabled people needed civil rights protection, and it notified politicians that people with disabilities could wield their power as an electoral block” (122). However, as Brune notes, though drawing *parallels* to other minority identities, the minority model approach does not recognize intersectionality as a part of the experience (124). Subsequently, US Disability Studies scholars have utilized new sociopolitical approaches, such as Alison Kafer’s political/relational model (8) and Tobin Siebers’s complex embodiment (22), that incorporate intersectionality and do not seek to re-

categorize disability as “normal.” Rather, these approaches understand disability as a social category to build identity, community, and pride around precisely *because* of its difference.

Because the social model neglects to focus on the specificities of disability and to acknowledge that despite disability’s status as a social construction, it has the potential to create some real inequalities. “Questions of physicality, of different mental capacities, of unique ways of thinking and being in the world are not the problem. The real problem is that people get separated and get isolated from each other,” Alito Alessi is quoted as saying on the DanceAbility International website. Alessi’s statement, and by association, the DanceAbility rhetoric, discusses disability as a motivator to simply shift attitudinal barriers. While this approach does acknowledge disability as a social construction, and suggests that because of that, we can change it, it also greatly simplifies history and ignores the lasting effects of oppression, regardless of attitude. Therefore, in order for the liberal inclusion model to work, the political realities need to be obscured. Representationally, the dances have to aesthetically create a representation of the relationship between disabled and non-disabled people that does not exist in real life.

That said, this perspective of disability, of it being positioned as difference, and “an attitude” aligns itself with an individual model of thinking about disability, depoliticizes it, and neglects to recognize a perspective with which many disabled people identify: that the experience of disability is about societal oppression, as opposed to physicality or other aspects of disability (Charlton 5).

DanceAbility is thus not about centering the disabled dancer, and seeing into the disability experience, but rather attempting to re-construct the disabled dancer as “normal.” This subsequently reassures the non-disabled bodymind that acknowledging oppression is not a part of the form and that if we just fix our attitudes and the built environment, we will create equity.

“The focus is on working with all people. Really you just see people as people and that’s nothing special” Alessi says in a 2005 article with the *Register-Guard*. The “nothing special,” neglects to acknowledge participation in dance as an extension of life, and regardless of how progressive and inclusive the space is, the embodied and lived experiences of disability still influence how people learn, make choices, move, advocate for themselves. In *Engaging Bodies*, Ann Cooper Albright writes about a similar “nothing special” approach that critics take when mentioning the presence of disability in dance, such as in Gus Solomons’s 1992 Cleveland Dancing Wheels review, “Did I mention that Verdi-Fletcher dances in her wheelchair?” Albright writes, “In assuming that disability does not make a (big) difference, this writer is, in fact, limiting the (real) difference that disability can make in radically refiguring how we look at, conceive of, and organize bodies in the twenty-first century” (302).

This language of assumed equality fits directly into Tobin Siebers’s ideology of ability, an ideological framework for understanding the ways that society asserts able-bodied hegemony. The ideology of ability claims that, “Disability can be overcome through will power or acts of the imagination. It is not real but imaginary,” and that [quoting Mark O’Brien’s poem, “Walkers”], “Disability’s no big deal,” and that “Disabilities are the gateway to special abilities. Turn disability to an advantage” (10). The use of disability as a teaching tool, suggestion that it is about attitude, and the assurance that it is “nothing special” all encapsulate key tenets of the ideology of ability. Although Alessi acknowledges the socially constructed nature of disability, the focus on inclusion relies on the belief that disabled and non-disabled dancers are equal in the form. This reliance inadvertently obscures disability oppression and creates a simplified model understanding that of the lived experience and histories of disabled people and artists. By suggesting that a mere shift in perspective can make the difference, it

creates the meaning that disability oppression is not embedded in layers of history, medicine, politics and economics. He discusses the importance of using dance as a tool to bring about “democracy in art” (Markstrom), which presumes equality and mutuality.

However, if disability truly is nothing special, why does it matter at all that disabled people are participating in DanceAbility? How can disability be “nothing special” and also groundbreaking? When I joined the DanceAbility teacher certification in 2015, I was interested in the language that would be used to discuss non-physical disability, such as my own. On the first day, I explained to the group that I have a sensory integration disorder and the way that it manifests in my movement practice. Alessi suggested reframing my sensory integration disorder as a sensory integration “difference.” “It really isn’t a problem to me,” he offered. Interested in the sociopolitics of my experience as a disabled person, I rejected this re-framing, but I was aptly aware that this suggestion was representative of a larger vantage point that has existed in this form, and in many other integrated dance forms, for decades. This vignette encapsulates the pervasive ideology of ability underneath the liberal language of inclusion that pervades integrated dance: the idea that we can simply flip a switch and change perspective, dispel myths, and in effect, become “nothing special,” and that we can use euphemism to neutralize an impairment or experience of disability. This depoliticization does not recognize disability as an experience of oppression, but rather as something that is simply “different.” Echoing the mission statements, this suggestion was one that praised my “diversity” and classified me into a category of difference without needing to recognize the social and environmental realities of my disablement. It sought to normalize me and my experience with disability. These euphemisms minimizing disability as difference and diversity are symptomatic of the larger phenomenon: integrated dance rarely focuses on the sociopolitical underpinnings of disability and instead uses

inclusion to re-categorize disability and the disabled dancer normal. This comes at the cost of depoliticization of disability while positioning all dancers as “equal,” despite structures that suggest it otherwise.

The mission statements of many of these dance companies have changed slightly in the last 30 years, but the prevailing ideas have stayed constant. DanceAbility International developed the tagline “The Art of Being Together.” DanceAbility materials also say that they, “Encourage the evolution of mixed-abilities dance by cultivating a common ground for creative expression for all people regardless of abilities, economic status, age, or race” (DanceAbility International) in their mission. These words closely resemble AXIS’s mission to “create and perform contemporary dance that is developed through the collaboration of dancers with and without disabilities; to teach dance and educate about collaboration and disability through community education and outreach programs” (AXIS Dance Company). Throughout the missions of liberal inclusion model groups, the desire to improve mainstream attitudes about disability and dance repeats. DanceAbility stresses that the organization “helps decrease the prejudice and misconceptions about diversity in the field of dance, and by extension in society,” (DanceAbility International) while CandoCo claims that they, “Create excellent and profound experiences for audiences and participants that excite, challenge and broaden perceptions of art and ability, and place people and collaboration at the heart of our work” (Candoco Dance Company), and Cleveland Dancing Wheels claims to, “Erase negative stereotypes about people with disabilities in professional careers, primarily in the arts” (Dancing Wheels). These goals correspond to similar goals to create equity and goals of professionalism, and are similarly simplistic. The process of erasing stereotypes and engaging with the mainstream about disability is a process of convincing the mainstream that disabled people can be artists is a process of defending our

humanity, and this process encourages the further use of disability as a tool for the education of non-disabled patrons.

In a 2012 article, Judith Smith argues that, “Bringing people with a difference together creates something that can’t be created without that difference and diversity.” (Dance review: AXIS dance company). Likewise, the current Cleveland Ballet Dancing Wheels website headlines, “A Unifying Expression of Movement for All.” This liberal language of togetherness, unification, and mutualism is expressed throughout the discourse in the present, as well as when integrated dance was gaining momentum in the late 80s and early 90s.

The use of the liberal inclusion language of mixedness and togetherness, as in AXIS’s “dancers with and without disabilities,” DanceAbility’s “The Art of Being Together” creates a vocabulary that critics echo in dance reviews. The commitment to education and diversity prevails in these mission statements and suggests an idyllic space of collaboration, where all people are equal. However, it also indicates that non-disabled collaborators are necessary for this work to happen. In this model, there are not therefore spaces where only disabled people come together—it is always with reference to non-disabled counterparts. That said, as I will explore in later sections, the dynamics of leadership and the models of collaboration do not reflect this mutualism.

## 2.6 **Diminutive Critique**

The normalizing rhetoric of togetherness and professionalism, as well as the separation from disability art, created space for corresponding critique from critics of these companies. For instance, when reviewing a range of integrated dance groups in their article “Wheels Welcome,” Jessie Male (2005) writes, “With feet flexed and hands protruding from the fabric, dancers’ limbs were indistinguishable from each other” (43). Male later asks, “When the audiences cheer

or cry, are they responding to the choreography or to the presence of dancers who use wheelchairs? Can one critique the choreography while seeing past the disability” (43)? Their question brings up an important question: to appropriately critique, does one have to see past disability? What is so problematic about disability that a dance critic cannot see it and also critique the piece?

In a 1996 *New York Times* review of a festival called Mixed Ability Dance Festival '96, Jack Anderson wrote a piece called “Wheelchairs Propelled by the Imagination.” Anderson used poetic language to describe the assistive technology, and neglects to pay attention to the *people* actually “propelling” the wheelchairs, and instead remains fascinated about the assistive technology. He writes, “The wheelchair glided so effortlessly that the piece brought the ease and elegance of ice skating to mind,” and informs the reader, “Wheelchairs can dance,” and “Wheelchairs rolled with dancers in them.” This willingness only to talk about the wheelchairs both objectify disabled people and refuse to recognize disabled artists as professionals. The astonishment of this statement barely recognizes the humanity of the dancer, let alone gives professional critique. In this example, the critic does exactly what the rhetoric does: he sees precisely the disability and the assistive technology, and through denying that disability exists and is any different from non-disability, fails to recognize the uniqueness of the disabled dancer, instead only objectifying disability. The only time when the critic writes about the dancers themselves, they are, “clamber[ing] over each other on the floor.” The juxtaposition of the graceful wheelchair and the clumsy movement of the wheelchair-less disabled dancer is stark. The review either discusses the disabled dancers in this “clambering” state, or propelled by wheelchairs with elegance. There is no space for disabled dancers as agents of movement.

Sixteen years later, in a 2012 review of a performance by AXIS Dance Company, critic Mark Beachy further inspirationalizes AXIS Dance’s professional work. He writes, “The Axis Dance Company creates choreography that is unique and dancers who are inspiring. And even though the dancers are all physically different, there seem to be no limits as to the art that can be created together.” The “even though,” suggests surprise—it creates the meaning that disabled dancers might *not* be able to create art together with non-disabled dancers. Later in the review, he comments also on the AXIS Dance piece *Full of Words*, writing that it, “was particularly interesting since it had Mr. Bell out of his wheelchair and into a reclining chair while Alice Sheppard was also out of her wheelchair and danced using a table and chair.” In this review, it is again apparent that preoccupation with assistive technology—even in its absence—keeps critique from even entering the realm of the actual performance or dance technique. Likewise, this critique contains a statement from artistic director Judith Smith, quoting her as saying that these performances give the audience, ““a new sense of what dance can be. What ability is. How people can work together...”” This statement echoes the mission of breaking barriers and reinforces critics’ focus on inspiring the audience. It also places the responsibility on the integrated companies to transform the audience’s perception. Another critic, Zachary Whittenburg, notes in a 2011 *Time Out Chicago* review of this piece, that, “*Full [of Words]’s* confining role for Bell, who spent the piece in a recliner, seemed contradictory, reactionary. Perhaps Brew sought to remind us that life on wheels isn’t easy, even for miraculously able bodies like Bell’s and Sheppard’s. It’s a truth worth remembering” (Whittenberg). His read of this piece, choreographed by disabled choreographer Marc Brew, demonstrates the way that critics consistently find pity, inspiration, and “teachable moments” in integrated dance pieces,

regardless of the caliber and professionalism, which detracts from the possibilities of professional criticism.

## 2.7 **Adaptation, Translation, Transcription: Technique in the Inclusion Approach**

The cultural moment for disability dictated the way that these forms developed. In one of the earliest experiments in integrated dance in the US, a group of non-disabled contact improvisers experimented with including physically-disabled people in the form. Advertised as a contact improvisation workshop for people with disabilities, 100 people came to this first workshop in Eugene Oregon: a workshop entitled “Every Body Can Dance.” The documentation of this workshop, *Common Ground* (1990), captures this experimental moment in contemporary dance history. Contact improvisation veterans Karen Nelson, Steve Paxton, and Alito Alessi, among others, discuss the role of equality in contact improvisation and how this form can translate across boundaries of difference. The idea was to do mixed ability contact improvisation and communicate through the sense of touch. Many of these non-disabled contemporary dancers and contact improvisers had never danced with disabled people before. This workshop was an experiment of finding equivalents, or “common ground” in the disabled body, so that disabled dancers could participate in the pre-existing contact improvisation form. This work was a project of embodied translation—an integration into the already-standardized language of contact improvisation. In the year 1987, Alito Alessi danced with a wheelchair-user, employing technique from contact improvisation and translating the concept directly to her disabled body. “This is like the Rolling Point of contact,” he says as he holds her forward in her chair, and they lean against each other, rotating and turning, a clear example of this early work as a work of translation.

In the early days of Cleveland Dancing Wheels, the company partnered with the Cleveland Ballet. Mary Verdi-Fletcher's commitment to balletic and modern movement forms provided a foundation of technique for Cleveland Dancing Wheels. While connected to the Cleveland Ballet, Cleveland Ballet Dancing Wheels did not just display a ballet aesthetic, but actually required that dancers in the company go through extensive ballet training to be able to participate. In a 1996 article in *The Columbian*, "Cleveland Ballet Gets its Wheels" Verlezza, the non-disabled co-artistic director and choreographer at the time, discusses the use of the May O'Donnell technique for training the dancers. This modern technique, originally created for non-disabled dancers, has a focus on floor work, which makes for a smooth adaptation to a wheelchair technique. Because of the focus on seated dancing, this technique centers the upper body in much of the technique. In a 1998 dance review, "Dancing Wheels Enables the Disabled," Mary Verdi-Fletcher is quoted as saying:

They do a lot of work seated on the floor in this technique, so there was a good relationship between their knowledge of the use of the upper body and the contraction work that could be applied to wheelchair dancers as well. At this time we realized there was a technique that could be taught, that could be used as a barometer of whether it was being done appropriately or not. (Williams)

This employment of a pre-existing (and non-disabled) dance form likely makes Cleveland Dancing Wheels palatable and familiar, and also sets it up to be recognized in the mainstream dance scene.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Mary Verdi-Fletcher is not the only artistic director who requires ballet technique. Kitty Lunn, artistic director of Infinity Dance Theater requires ballet background of seven years prior to becoming a member of a company (Male). However, it should be noted that one of the largest barriers for disabled artists is training. Difficult to receive this training and art development as disabled artists (Gill and Sandahl).

In praxis, this adaptation or translation technique happens with various codified forms of dance, including ballet, partner dancing, and contact improvisation. For example, “Tango #4” danced by Kris Lenzo and Anita Fillmore Kenney, and choreographed by Sarah Najera, all of Chicago’s MOMENTA, is a work of translation. In this piece, Lenzo, a white, male, middle-aged wheelchair-user and Fillmore Kenney, a non-disabled, younger, white female dance together recreating an adapted form of the tango. The sensuality of the piece reinforces the heteronormativity of the form, reifying gender roles as well through the choreography. As Lenzo lifts Kenney, he demonstrates his strength and classic masculine characteristics. This display of great strength affirms normative masculinity and creates meaning about the maintenance of masculinity and virility even in the presence of disability. These performances also suggest that these performances are geared toward non-disabled audiences, taking a “myth-busting” approach, and affirming that disabled people are, indeed, sexual beings. Disabled people already know this. It also asserts that disabled sexuality is “just like non-disabled people,” pigeonholing us into often oppressive models that are meant to mimic the norm.

## 2.8 **It Can’t Be that Easy**

Integrated dance rhetoric, form, critique, leadership, and ideology work together to promote a liberal ideology of dance that strives to bring people (disabled and non-disabled) together on a basis of “common language,” “togetherness,” and “equality.” In doing so, it operates outside of a sociopolitical approach of understanding disability as a minority group and implies a kind of false, yet idyllic “sameness” and “equality,” simplifying the lived experience of disability and depoliticizing it. However, if this equality was actually achievable, why is all dance not inclusive? This approach de-centers disability and promotes an aesthetic of assimilation, which, in its inoffensiveness and spirit of inclusion, is palatable to mainstream (and

generally non-disabled) audiences. Throughout the discourse is a desire to be a part of the dance mainstream and to break stereotypes, but a neglect to question the standards of “professional” and who that standard implicitly excludes. In the chapters to follow, I analyze different approaches and discuss the importance of politicizing disability, as well as developing crip aesthetics and a choreography of the disabled bodymind.

### **3. THE PUSH AGAINST: DISABILITY PERFORMANCE AS COUNTERCULTURE**

In the previous chapter, I discussed the way that leadership, rhetoric, and form create meaning that dictate a relationship to the mainstream contemporary dance world. I explored the critique they received in relation to the rhetoric used by key players in the companies and values they embodied. AXIS Dance Company, DanceAbility, CandoCo, and Cleveland Dancing Wheels work for renown in the world of contemporary dance, and also commit to the education of aspiring dancers, as well as education of the non-disabled mainstream. The discourse surrounding them contributes to what I have called “liberal inclusion”: a notion of togetherness and universality in the human condition that generates altruism and depoliticizes disability and the dance companies themselves. Desiring a form of art with political charge and resistance to the mainstream, and lamenting the lack of opportunity to make work about the lived experience of disability, Leroy Moore and Patty Berne, disabled artists of color, founded Sins Invalid in 2006.<sup>20</sup>

Whereas integrated dance companies I discussed in “The Art of Being Together” were a part of the liberal inclusion approach, I categorize Sins Invalid as a countercultural approach, and conceptualize the group as a politicized performance project that sets itself apart from other disability performance work through their approach to disability identity, power, and education. The countercultural approach invokes the politicization of Sins Invalid, and the way that it works against mainstream paradigms by responding to injustices and social issues.

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<sup>20</sup> There are different versions of the Sins Invalid founding narrative. Some sources (Sins Invalid) cite Todd Herman as a third co-founder of Sins Invalid, while others, including interviews with Patty Berne cite Moore and Berne as the only two co-founders (Beebe).

To clarify my understanding of counterculture, it is necessary to first specify the definition that I use for culture. In his essay “Culture,” Stephen Greenblatt (1995) writes, “The ensemble of beliefs and practices that form a given culture function as a pervasive technology of control, a set of limits within which social behavior must be contained, a repertoire of models to which individuals must conform” (225). He explains that art transmits culture, and that it is important to use cultural texts to gain contextual understanding of any given culture. Using this definition, culture exists to define societal boundaries of order. Thus, counterculture denotes a departure from such boundaries that society sets forth. Sins Invalid sets itself apart by rejecting mainstream notions of normalcy, acknowledging intersectionality, and claiming that coalition is essential to their work and to liberation.

This spirit of resistance reflects the countercultural charge of the group. The Sins Invalid mission states, “We develop and present cutting-edge work where normative paradigms of ‘normal’ and ‘sexy’ are challenged, offering instead a vision of beauty and sexuality inclusive of all individuals and communities” (Sins Invalid). Therefore, they explicitly state that their work is a response to the mainstream by breaking norms and regaining power through creating a new set of cultural norms.

Whereas the companies I discussed in the liberal inclusion model were dance-based, Sins Invalid performances are a patchwork of various media and expression, in which artists perform poetry, tell stories, sing, dance, and perform multimedia performance art. Their work is experimental, sometimes taking an esoteric approach and other times embodying a more direct and educational tone. The pieces span a breadth of emotional content and subject matter. Power within the group is diffused more broadly, which sets it apart from integrated dance companies where there is a centralized power structure. Sins Invalid is based in the Bay Area of California

where they create an annual performance, but they also tour and travel throughout the country, both performing and holding educational workshops for artists.

Sins Invalid fosters a “politically engaged space” (Sins Invalid) and their educational goals center around supporting marginalized artists as well as educating organizations around their social justice values. They act as an intersectional and politicized response to the mainstream, finding value in coalition among marginalized identity and creating work about lived and embodied experiences of these identities.

Sins Invalid also positions themselves as a “performance group and art incubator” (Silverberg) that explores disability and sexuality and creates opportunities for marginalized people to incubate their work and build community. Their art is intersectional in nature, politicized, and decidedly resistant to the mainstream and hegemonic constructions of “normal” and “beautiful”. In this chapter, I argue that Sins Invalid creates a politicized bend to disability performance through conceptualizing disability as a social category and oppressed group, diffusing the power hierarchy within the group, and angling artistic development opportunities for oppressed people, instead of for the non-disabled mainstream. These tenets of Sins Invalid as well as the constellation of texts surrounding them support an overall mission to reclaim pride and beauty while resisting hegemony.

I begin by articulating the politicized framework through which I view Sins Invalid, and continue to discuss the power dynamics and hierarchy that exists within the group. I go on to frame the educational model upon which Sins Invalid works and differentiate from the way that the way the groups under the liberal inclusion model frame education. I go on to discuss the performance content, recognizing that these pieces, though different in content, context, and performer, share an element of resistance that reflects the dynamic of the group.

### 3.1 **Disability is Political: A Framework for Understanding Sins Invalid**

It is through the conceptualization of disability as a social category, the intersectional approach to their disability justice<sup>21</sup> framework, and their resistance to mainstream culture and values that I conceptualize and frame Sins Invalid as political. In a 2015 statement, Patty Berne defines the Sins Invalid understanding of Disability Justice:

A Disability Justice framework understands that all bodies are unique and essential, that all bodies have strengths and needs that must be met. We know that we are powerful not despite the complexities of our bodies, but because of them. We understand that all bodies are caught in these bindings of ability, race, gender, sexuality, class, nation state and imperialism, and that we cannot separate them. These are the positions from where we struggle. We are in a global system that is incompatible with life. There is no way stop a single gear in motion — we must dismantle this machine. (Berne)

#### *Social Category*

By conceptualizing disability as a social category, Sins Invalid politicizes the group and creates space to build community and coalition through a shared experience of oppression. In this chapter, I use the term “politicized” to describe the way that Sins Invalid addresses Disability as a social category and marginalized group. Although they engage heavily with politics, this term does not address external politics, but internal ideology. Their vision states, “Our stories, imbedded in analysis, offer paths from identity politics to unity amongst all oppressed people, laying a foundation for a collective claim of liberation and beauty” (Sins Invalid). Therefore, in categorizing disability as a social category, Sins Invalid paves the way to

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<sup>21</sup> This term is clarified and discussed later in the chapter.

take up issues of social and disability justice through their art and to create and incubate work that ultimately seeks liberation from oppression for disabled people as a collective group.

In his 2011 book, *Disability Theory*, Tobin Siebers provides a framework for conceptualizing disability as a social category, claiming that this framing puts a politicized spin on identity and connects it to the potential for social change. He writes, “To call disability an identity is to recognize that it is not a biological or natural property but an elastic social category both subject to social control and capable of effecting social change” (4). Siebers, like the Sins Invalid vision, invokes identity politics, explaining that group identity can be used as a tool to build community, harness power, and create political change. The recognition of it as a social category affirms that disability oppression affects disabled people systemically. His framework also recognizes that disability identity is not a default merely because of the presence of impairment. He writes:

Thus, identity is not the structure that creates a person’s pristine individuality or inner essence but the structure by which that person identifies and becomes identified with a set of social narratives, ideas, myths, values, and types of knowledge of varying reliability, usefulness, and verifiability. It represents the means by which the person, qua individual, comes to join a particular social body. (15)

Using this understanding of disability identity, to identify as disabled is to self-consciously take on political valence and connect oneself to a wider community. This resonates with the work of Sins Invalid artists who are not interested solely in the presence of impairment, but rather the way that the experience of oppression shapes who people are and drives their art.

The rhetoric that Sins Invalid uses plays a role in the politicization of the group as well and creates meaning within their art and their political identity. The group uses the term

“disability justice” to name the political framework they utilize to eradicate systems of oppression, instead of the more commonly used term “social justice.” They have developed their own meaning of this term, beginning a rhetorical process that carves out space in politicized movements that did not include issues of ableism before.<sup>22</sup> The phrase itself—through the use of both “disability” and “justice”—gestures toward the Disability Rights Movement, as well as social justice as key players in the countercultural approach that Sins Invalid embodies, but also separates themselves from both of these categories. In a 2011 Huffington Post interview, Berne discusses the way that the Sins Invalid rhetoric was informed by cultural gap. She says, “There wasn’t a complex analysis around disability in the disability arts scene. So much of the cultural work that is created by people with disabilities has focused on single identity politics around disability and lacks an analysis of race, queerness or gender, or any layering of experience” (Silverberg). She goes on to say that this pattern in politics and art is compounded by the “social justice left,” in places where their frameworks of liberation and activism often exclude disability from their understanding.

Through critiquing their (our) own movement and creating space for intersectionality, Sins Invalid creates new categories for understanding creative work contextualized within the movement and a politic for the changes they demand within social justice and disability rights. As Rachel Beebe of *Curve Magazine* writes about Sins Invalid, “They decided to found a project that would fill these gaps and simultaneously spark the second wave Berne refers to—one that would be inclusive, honest and healing” (55). In this quote, Berne refers to inclusion. However, its meaning shifts away from the connotation of the liberal inclusion model. In the liberal

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<sup>22</sup> There have been other groups who have used this term as well, but when I use it, I am using the meaning that Sins Invalid has created.

inclusion model, “inclusion” referred to including disabled people in forms that were generally inhabited by non-disabled dancers. In this model, however, Berne critiques the Disability Rights Movement. Her use of “inclusion” refers to intersectionality, and the importance of centering of people of color and queer people—people who have been historically excluded or marginalized—in the Disability Rights Movement.

Berne’s development of the term “disability justice” and the call for a shift in the movement has historical roots in the Disability Rights Movement. In his 1995 keynote address at the University of Michigan’s This/Ability: An Interdisciplinary Conference on Disability and the Arts, Paul Longmore reflected on the history of the Disability Rights Movement. He categorized the “first stage” as rights-based, and recognized that “the second phase” of the Disability Rights movement had begun. His speech called for disabled people to come together collectively in this second stage and “to explore or to create a disability culture” (215).<sup>23</sup> Patty Berne’s reference to “the second wave” differentiates between waves of disability *culture*, acknowledging the past and pushing activists and artists to continue to develop disability culture, but with an intersectional lens.<sup>24</sup>

### *Intersectionality*

The call to recognize disability as a social category is an intersectional task and requires coalition, and Sins Invalid takes on this complexity through creating art that celebrates complex identity and recognizes issues that affect various marginalized groups. Coalition drives Sins

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<sup>23</sup> This speech later became the chapter “The Second Phase: From Disability Rights to Disability Culture” in his 2003 book, *Why I Burned My Book and Other Essays on Disability*, which is the source I use here.

<sup>24</sup> Additionally, this language parallels the language often used to differentiate between generations in the feminist movement in the United States. In American feminism, the second wave of feminist is often critiqued for its focus on middle class, white women. Feminists in the third wave of feminism differentiated themselves by claiming a focus on intersectionality (Collins).

Invalid to pick up causes such as police brutality, institutionalization, eugenics, and incarceration that affect marginalized people.<sup>25</sup> The focus on intersectionality ascertains that sexuality, disability, class, race, gender, and other identity signifiers mutually inform one another and are inextricable. In the 2009 film *Sins Invalid: An Unshamed Claim to Beauty*, artist and activist scholar Lezlie Frye explains the way that her sexuality and disability are co-constitutive in her identity. The film captures her saying, “It’s easy to fall into a trap of proving that you are sexual despite your disability. My sexuality, my sexual identity, derives directly out of my disabled body. And *that* is what I want to sexualize, *that* is what I want to politicize” (*Sins Invalid: An Unshamed Claim*). Thus, Frye’s work does not seek to rebrand her sexuality as normative nor dispel myths about disability and sexuality. Instead of compartmentalizing sexual identity and disability identity as separate experiences, Frye’s work explores the way they mutually inform one another. She approaches identity through complex embodiment, which, as Siebers writes, “...theorizes the body and its representations as mutually transformative” (25), in which a subject does not hierarchize one aspect of identity over another.

In the art of *Sins Invalid*, artists experiment at the intersection of identity characteristics. In one scene featured in *Sins Invalid*, Leroy Moore, a disabled African American man, throws off his shirt, revealing a leather harness, as Seeley Quest puts on a doctor’s coat, saying, “It’s been a little while since you’ve been a patient, hasn’t it?” They look each other up and down, and Moore says, “Yes it has, doctor. Too long.” Seeley Quest, a white transgender person, in a white coat flirts with Moore. Their queerness, race, and disability are central to the scene. The two play with the medical gaze, infusing kink and humor, taking their non-hegemonic identities—identities that have been historically and presently medicalized—and subverting through taking

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<sup>25</sup> Their second film, *Disability Liberated* (2015) centers around incarceration and police brutality.

on the roles of authority, Quest impersonating the role of “doctor,” and Moore taking on agency as “patient.” The deviant sexual play interspersed with the medical language mocks the medicalization of the non-normative sexuality, non-white identities, and disability. Their piece questions the legitimacy of these roles and this power structure, reclaims the diagnostic gaze, and rebrands them in positions of power and sexualization. This is an expression of crip sexuality, and although it gestures toward normative medical interaction, it does not seek to mimic it in any way. The queerness, the cripness, and the blatant sexualization and kink of the scene interact and demonstrate the irreverence with which the group takes the systems that oppressed them to not simply flip the power structure, but explode it.

In the introduction to his 2006 book, *Crip Theory*, Robert McRuer expands Adrienne Rich’s concept of compulsory heterosexuality, first developed in 1980, and develops a related term called compulsory able-bodiedness. This term not only riffs off of Rich, but also further elaborates and complicates Rich’s original term. Able-bodiedness as compulsory argues that this system that, “In a sense produces disability, is thoroughly interwoven with the system of compulsory heterosexuality that produced queerness: that, in fact, compulsory heterosexuality is contingent on compulsory able-bodiedness” (McRuer 2). McRuer, like *Sins Invalid*, recognizes homosexuality’s and disability’s respective (though mutually informed and intertwined) “pathologized past” (1) and thus seeks to draw attention to it, instead of to normalize it.

Creating representations of sexuality and identity independent from normative culture is paramount to *Sins Invalid*. In *Sins Invalid: An Unshamed Claim to Beauty*, Patty Berne explains that the sexual expression in the art that they create does not seek to mimic hegemonic, normative expressions of sexuality to gain legitimacy. She says, “As a person with a disability, I don’t have to mimic able-bodiedness in order to be sexual. I can experience my sexuality as a

crip, as someone who fully occupies a non-normative physical space.” She continues to say, “And part of that movement to fully living in one’s own experience is naming and resisting dehumanization. So all of that has to be in the show. It’s in life, so it’s in the show.” Through the way that society manufactures concepts of normalcy, these outsider identities form along the margins. Sins Invalid represents these non-normative identities and expression, and through it, create a space for visibility and pride. Because mainstream ideas about normal are pervasive across various categories of identity, this countercultural way of looking at beauty and humanity develops co-constitently within the work of Sins Invalid’s diverse artists.

In a 2011 Huffington Post interview by Cory Silverberg with Patty Berne, Berne describes the complexity of Sins Invalid’s discussion and performance of sexuality. She explains that the company challenges audience to think about disability and sexuality complexly, raising their expectation for their audience. Berne says, “...Sins Invalid is not just about saying ‘We’re sexual too!’—clearly, we are sexual too—but it’s about how do we crip sex, how do we have sex and view it erotically through the lens of disability.” This “clearly, we are sexual too,” affirms sexuality and expression of each person. In the “clearly,” model that Berne describes, the artists and performers in Sins Invalid do not make art to claim and defend their sexuality. Instead, they work with more complex and nuanced ideas than the groups I discussed in chapter one who took the liberal inclusion approach.<sup>26</sup> Needing to prove that disabled people are sexual beings and

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<sup>26</sup> It is worth noting that the integrated dance groups that I discussed in Chapter 2 likely have influenced Sins Invalid and their reception, and that some of the performers in Sins Invalid have also performed with these liberal inclusion groups. It may be argued that part of why Sins Invalid is able to “raise the baseline” is because these representations existed before them. When Mary Verdi-Fletcher, for instance, had to prove that she could be a dancer, she was met with resistance and dismay. That said, there is not a direct causation, and regardless of the “progress” disabled artists have made, companies and organizations such as DanceAbility International are still making art that lay claim to their very humanity.

have sexuality, like needing to prove that disabled people can be artists, keeps the art from exploring the depths of what it means to be a disabled artist with a sexual identity. Berne's and Sins Invalid's affirmation allows the group to explore diverse relationships to sexuality and disability, to take up queerness, sadomasochism, masturbation, eugenics, dating, and relationships in various capacities.

The Sins Invalid mission discusses the way that medicalization is central to the disabled and queer experiences of discrimination. The mission states, "We understand the experience of disability to occur within any and all walks of life, with deeply felt connections to all communities impacted by the medicalization of their bodies, including trans, gender variant and intersex people, and others whose bodies do not conform to our culture(s)' notions of 'normal' or 'functional'" (Sins Invalid para 2). Thus, the group finds coalition among those deemed "not normal" by society. This discourse creates an ideological link between marginalized groups and generates resistance to hegemonic oppressive forces. What does it mean to unite under shared oppression, and is this unique to Sins Invalid or at the heart of all social movements? How do we find a balance between honoring individual experiences and finding the common ground between us to build coalition? These are some of the questions that Sins Invalid generates and explores, as well as questions for which I do not yet have answers, but will explore in the following section on resistance and counterculture.

*Resistance and Reaction: Counterculture at Work*

The process of building coalition through uniting under the non-hegemonic creates a reactionary tone to many of Sins Invalid's pieces. Although the pieces derive from a range of individual experiences, the fact that Sins Invalid features marginalized people means that many of the pieces respond and react to a similar referent: the mainstream, the hegemonic, or the normative, whether that be a specific governing body, person, or ideology.<sup>27</sup> In the case of Sins Invalid, art that uses a referent generally invokes the mainstream and hegemonic paradigms that they resist, establishing a counter-relationship to normalcy and normative representation.

Sins Invalid resists the hegemonic and uses a countercultural approach in their direct confrontation of ableist belief systems and rhetoric. In a piece featured in the 2009 Invalid performance and film, Mat Fraser, a white, male, disabled performer enters the stage while the audience hears a soundscape of voices talking, saying words and phrases such as, "hero" "bravery" "disabled friend," and "I don't see you as disabled." As these voices overlap, Mat, alone on the stage, begins using martial arts, punching and kicking at the air. As the voices continue, he transitions into reacting—jerking back as if responding to being punched, kicked, and beaten up. He falls on the ground several times, struggling to get up, while the soundscape continues. He eventually stops even being able to get up, then writhes on the ground, and remains still until he is dragged off stage, bloodied. His piece creates the meaning that even when disabled people try to fight, a society that relentlessly inspirationalizes, pities, and devalues disabled people continues to oppress disabled people will eventually keep us down.

Within Tobin Siebers's ideology of ability, hegemonic ideas about disability promote both the "preference for able-bodiedness" as well as lays claim to human status (8). He provides

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<sup>27</sup> There are pieces in Sins Invalid that do not share this referent, and these will be discussed in the next chapter.

a series of ways that the ideology of ability manifests in society (10), demonstrating how difficult and complex it is to weed out. Within this list, Siebers includes “Disability can be overcome through will power or acts of the imagination,” “Overcoming is an event to be celebrated,” “If they [disabled people] could think of themselves as able-bodied, they would be healthier and happier” (11). These characteristics are prominent in Fraser’s piece. The soundscape of voices are speakers of the ideology of ability. While turning the societal messages into actual voices in a soundscape, Fraser uses his body and art to demonstrate the pervasiveness and make flesh the impact—in his case literal—that the ideology of ability can have on a disabled person. The piece does not shy away from making the audience uncomfortable, especially when Fraser remains still on the stage for several seconds until he is dragged off of it.

Leah Lakshmi-Piepzna Samarasinha performs poetry that, like Fraser’s performance, refers to the mainstream, but defines her space outside of it. Her work creates space for imagining a world where marginalized bodyminds are celebrated and valued. In a 2009 performance captured in the documentary film *Sins Invalid*, she sits on the edge of a bench and looks out into the audience, asking, “What would it take for us to know our bodies beautiful, to wash them clean. NO. *Not* washed clean. What if our working class fucked up chronically ill sick survivor bodies—beautiful. Just like they are...for my body [she reaches toward herself], for your body [she reaches out with her whole arm and bends forward] to come back from being washed away.” She claims her identity out of that which is not considered beautiful in mainstream constructions of normal, and re-claims it to be beautiful and enough. She gestures to the socially-constructed impulse to “correct” our bodies and social condition, and then adamantly refutes this impulse. For Siebers, a vision such as Samarasinha’s reacts to the oppressive ideology of ability and works towards claiming disability—and other factors—as beautiful, and

collapsing the oppressive structure. Within the ideology of ability, Siebers references Simi Linton's work, writing that, "It is vital to show to what extent the ideology of ability collapses once we 'claim disability'" (Siebers 11 qtd. in Linton). Samarasinha's work claims disability, as well other marginalized categories of identities that she embodies. Also evoking ideas that are present in Siebers's ideology of ability, Samarasinha's work demonstrates the damage that can be done from constantly measuring oneself up to non-disabled society.

Samarasinha imagines a future in which we envision ourselves with all of our disabilities and characteristics that society deems "inferior," and to create new categories of beautiful. In short, she is speaking to this need to "claim disability." In her 1998 book *Claiming Disability*, Linton writes, "We have come out not with brown woolen lap robes over our withered legs or dark glasses over our pale eyes but in shorts and sandals, in overalls and business suits, dressed for play and work—straightforward, unmasked, and unapologetic" (3).<sup>28</sup> Linton claims that it is the preference for non-disability and the constant pressure to overcome disability that keeps disability from being envisioned as beautiful.<sup>29</sup> However, through claiming it our right to be unapologetic and to define ourselves as beautiful and proud, we can begin to make this vision a reality. That said, is claiming beautiful just another way that we rebrand normativity? What falls outside of "beautiful" for Sins Invalid? Although there is a great deal of beauty laden in Sins Invalid performances, there are also works that find home and power in the freakery of disability.

Sins Invalid looks past the social model, and reads complexity into the disability experience. Social oppression is critical to the conversation, but they also create a space where artists can discuss the impact of impairment. Whereas activists at times shied away from discussing impairment, Sins Invalid does not. In *Disability Theory* (2011), Tobin Siebers writes:

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<sup>28</sup> Linton cites Florence Weiner's 1986 *No Apologies*.

<sup>29</sup> Siebers lays out a related phenomenon in "the ideology of ability" in *Disability Theory* (2008).

The theory of complex embodiment raises awareness of the effects of disabling environments on people's lived experience of the body, but it emphasizes as well that some factors affecting disability, such as chronic pain, secondary health effects, and aging, derive from the body...Complex embodiment theorizes the body and its representations as mutually transformative. (25)

Sins Invalid takes on complex embodiment, represents the expansiveness of disability, and recognizes that the lived experience of disability is vast. In this model, this wide range of experiences acknowledges different individual experiences, but simultaneously builds coalition among these various people who make art together.

### 3.2 **Dispersal of Power: Leadership and Sins Invalid**

Marginalized artists have been present in the various tiers of the power structure of Sins Invalid since the founding of the group. Their commitment to, "Centraliz[e] artists of color and queer and gender-variant artists as communities who have been historically marginalized," (Sins Invalid) demonstrates the way that Sins Invalid models disability justice and recognizes the structural injustices that keep marginalized people from gaining power in the mainstream. In the film, *Sins Invalid*, Patty Berne approaches disability as an "under-resourced community," claiming that, "Most artists with disabilities have not had a chance to incubate their work publicly. There just aren't a lot of places for disabled artists to work." In the first chapter, I addressed the fact that many of the integrated dance companies that follow a liberal inclusion model have non-disabled artists and people occupying hegemonic identities in leadership positions in the group, or in temporary positions in which they are flaunted as guest professionals to direct or choreograph pieces and thus help the company gain more legitimacy. Thus, Patty Berne's acknowledgement of the importance of creating space for disabled people in each

stratification of the group is indicative of a departure from the liberal inclusion model, and a difference in value system. The mission statement on the Sins Invalid website and promotional materials discusses “cutting-edge work,” but is also devoid of the claim or desire to fit into the mainstream art world. Thus, they do not rely on hegemonic identities to execute their mission.

Instead of commissioning directors and choreographers from the larger art world, Sins Invalid focuses on the incubation of art from within the group through performance workshops and political education workshops aimed towards amateur artists and community organizations. In workshop settings, Sins Invalid artists critique their own work with a core team of collaborators, and many of these pieces become a part of the annual performance. Through internally workshopping and incubating with other members of the group, Sins Invalid disperses power among key players from marginalized groups and the group functions as a collective.<sup>30</sup> The power structure of Sins Invalid and placement of marginalized people in positions of authority is paramount to effecting change in an art world that consistently disempowers marginalized people and looks hegemonic identities for legitimacy. Their commitment to, “Promote leadership opportunities for people with disabilities within our communities and within the broader social justice movement,” (Sins Invalid para 3) creates the meaning that to participate in Sins Invalid is to make an agreement to reconceptualize power as something that exists with disabled bodies and minds, people of color, and queer people.

With Berne as director, and several other people on the Sins team who critique the art and take leadership roles in organizing performances, Sins Invalid artists critique each other from within and have access to feedback about their work from insiders. Berne says of her directorial

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<sup>30</sup> Although Sins Invalid is a collective, they are not ahierarchical. Patty Berne is the director of the group, and several other participants also have relative positions of authority, however, it is important to note that all leaders occupy marginalized identities and that power is still dispersed more than in groups like DanceAbility.

process, “When I work with people, I try to amplify what they’re saying. Kind of distill it and amplify it” (Sins Invalid: An Unshamed Claim). Thus, disabled people are both the critics and the performers, providing each other a platform for their work, and rebuilding hierarchy, seeking to amplify the voices of marginalized people from a community orientation.

Despite the desire to put marginalized people in power, Sins Invalid does not exclude people from hegemonic group identities, stating, “Demographic identity alone does not determine commitment to liberation” (Sins Invalid para 1) in their vision statement, but they also do not claim that connection to these hegemonic identity groups is necessary for the production of this art. Instead, they centralize marginalized groups and empower those individuals. Their re-centralization is a statement of counterculture, and the desire to find beauty and validation from within. While claiming inclusion in the mission, writing that they challenge normative paradigms through, “Offering instead a vision of beauty and sexuality inclusive of all individuals and communities” (Sins Invalid para 1). In this context, Sins Invalid simultaneously claims inclusion and resists normative paradigms. Although both the liberal inclusion model and the countercultural model claim inclusion, there seems to be a different valence. How do each of these groups use inclusion to bolster their different, and arguably conflicting missions? What is the difference between non-disabled people’s absence in the liberal inclusion model versus their absence from the countercultural model?

The well-worn refrains of “togetherness” between disabled and non-disabled people in the liberal inclusion model insinuate that non-disabled people are essential to the work, this claim, however, rather states that the people who are necessary for this work are those occupying marginalized identities. In the countercultural model, it seems that the work would encounter few

issues in the absence of non-disabled people. The combination of the leadership and the desire to see difference as essential and valuable gives inclusion a different valence.

### 3.3 **View of Education: Creating Space for Amateur Artistic Development**

Like the liberal inclusion groups, Sins Invalid is invested in education, although it is the angle and goal of the education which separates their approach. In the liberal inclusion approach, although disabled artists were sometimes the recipients of education, in the form of dance training and workshops, a main focus of education to educate the mainstream about disability in efforts to change stereotypes. In Sins Invalid's countercultural approach, instead of seeking to change stereotypes in mainstream society, the group is committed to the art education of the disability community in a model of disability justice. The mission states, "Sins Invalid is a performance project that incubates and celebrates artists with disabilities, centralizing artists of color and queer and gender-variant artists as communities who have been historically marginalized" (para 1). Through *centralizing* the experiences of marginalized artists, their relationship with the mainstream and hegemonic identities takes a back seat, which, I argue, creates a social justice approach to education. Through their commitment to the margins, they question mainstream paradigms and hegemonic normative structures. They say, "We develop and present cutting-edge work where normative paradigms of 'normal' and 'sexy' are challenged" (para 1). Therefore, the element of challenging normal is essential to their work.

Sins Invalid calls itself an "art incubator": not only do they perform original work, but they workshop and create it, providing opportunities for amateurs to develop their artistic process. This approach differs from other companies because they prioritize new artists. Whereas many companies expect their dancers to come in with professional training, Sins Invalid acknowledges that disabled artists have staggeringly lower opportunities than non-disabled

artists. In incubating art, they demonstrate a commitment to developing a body of work and continuing to sustain disability art, through critiquing current work and mentoring a new generation of artists. The annual production that Sins Invalid compiles each year is a body of performance art, rather than a cohesive dance or theater piece; their performance varies in expression, tone, media format, indicative of an openness to artistic style and personal innovation.

Sins Invalid work is original solo performance or collaboration developed through workshopping, and is conceived from within the community and about the community. Unlike the liberal inclusion groups, Sins Invalid does not commission professionals to prove their worth as a company or to educate marginalized company members. Sins Invalid members critique each other to improve their art, demonstrating a value of artistic development over professionalism. Within this group, the markers of this art as “good” is not acceptance in the mainstream contemporary art world. Incubating their own art is another way that Sins Invalid marshals their support marginalized leadership as essential to liberation and collaboration.

Sins Invalid also opens opportunities for people of marginalized identities as well as experience levels by creating different levels of involvement for the company and various levels of educational opportunity. The group has a core group of members, but takes on temporary members for performance seasons. The commitment to fostering art from within marginalized communities demonstrates a distance from the non-disabled mainstream that this group is willing to have, though it might keep them from being recognized on a larger level.

Mat Fraser, a UK-based documentarian and performance artist, has performed in various shows with Sins Invalid, but is not a permanent member. Fraser is an established artist, but his role in Sins Invalid was not to feature his own work above others. His example demonstrates that

even when established artists are involved in the group, they do not participate from a hierarchical angle. Instead, new artists participate alongside practiced artists, creating opportunities for everyone to workshop their own work in a community environment, again beckoning to their less hierarchical structure. That said, as this group garners support and continues to produce work, they have gained appreciation both within the disability community and other activist communities, as well as attention from the mainstream. However, the difference is that they do not cater the performances to non-disabled audiences. While some artists take on a more instructive tone about oppression and how to break barriers, and the experience of disability, much of the work is directed to a disabled audience. That said, while the goal is neither to gain professional standing, nor to use professionals to gain mainstream acceptance, *Sins Invalid* has gained recognition in the years since their founding.

Because “normal” is not a status to which the company aspires, they use their individual experiences, claiming not that everyone is the same, but rather the experience of people from marginalized groups are vast and different, and because of this, art about unique experience is invaluable. In the *Sins Invalid* (2009) documentary, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha explains the way that incubating her art and working with director Patty Berne was different than other experiences she experienced in the art world. In *Sins Invalid: An Unshamed Claim to Beauty*, she says:

It was really amazing working with Patty because it was a switch from having to take care of everyone else’s stuff to feeling taken care of and nurtured as an artist. And that’s a gift that queer and trans folks of color, queer and trans folks with disabilities who are artists don’t usually get. We don’t usually get rehearsal space, and directorial feedback that is not trying to shove our disability or our race or our class or our gender away.

Disabled artists often commit time and emotional labor into simply proving that they can be artists. Integrated dance within the liberal inclusion approach have used their work to educate non-disabled audiences, as the examples of language in companies' missions that they wish to dispel myths and change stereotypes about disability and art (AXIS Dance Company; Candoco Dance Company; DanceAbility International; Dancing Wheels). This means that they take time to prove their artistic ability and, I argue, their humanity. In *Sins Invalid*, instead spending time and energy into arguing for basic rights, they assume that the audience who has come to see a performance does not need to be convinced that disabled people are artists, are sexual beings, or are fully human.<sup>31</sup> Through eliminating this basic educational step, they show respect for disabled artists' work and complex identities, refusing to commit them to educating non-disabled people. Through this, they create space and freedom to explore the complexity of the disability experience.

### 3.4 **The Undeniable Politicization of Our Stories**

In this chapter, I contextualized the politicization of *Sins Invalid*, exploring their concept of disability justice, and the way that it plays out in artistic content, power structures, and education. Instead of distancing themselves from intersectional identity and difference by seeking to find sameness, *Sins Invalid* contextualizes differences, complexities, and intersectional identities as beautiful and artistically valuable. They make this visible through their promotion of amateur artists, wide range of content, and commitment to marginalized communities in leadership roles and visible in art. This value system is present in the content as *Sins Invalid* artists have the opportunity to participate unapologetically without pandering to the non-disabled mainstream. Because they refuse to put artistic focus into proving status as artist,

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<sup>31</sup> While some may choose to educate, the difference is that it is not expected of performers.

dancer, creative, producer, there is more space to explore the expansiveness of art in both content and form. It also means that each individual artist can create art about their own individual intersectional identity.

Images of resistance and counterculture are through lines in these performances, and a part of this theme lies in referencing the oppressive forces that have oppressed marginalized communities. In their critique of normal, for example, Sins Invalid often refers to the mainstream. I contrasted this to the role of the mainstream and the non-disabled dancer in the liberal inclusion model, seeing a clear difference in these relationships.

Sins Invalid also applies a theory of complex embodiment in their approach to the complexity of sexuality and beauty, showing that coalition, diversity, phenomenological information from society feeds art, creativity, and a cultural movement. As their vision states, “Our stories, imbedded in analysis, offer paths from identity politics to unity amongst all oppressed people, laying a foundation for a collective claim of liberation and beauty” (Sins Invalid). Thus, the personal experience and political work is not mutually exclusive, because when we acknowledge the lived experience of us as full beings, we take on both personal and political valence. They claim that our varied stories and history are not only possible to sustain through collaboration, but also essential to our art.

#### **4. THE PULL TOWARD:**

##### **EMERGING CRIP AESTHETICS FROM OUR OWN BODYMINDS**

In Chapter 2, I discussed integrated dance companies that use inclusion and visibility in dance practice and performance as a means of connecting with audiences across difference. The liberal inclusion approach, I argued, did signal the emergence of disabled artists into mainstream culture and the professional dance scene, but these companies tended to adhere to mainstream and professional dance values and aesthetics even as they challenged them. Chapter 3 explored another approach, which I described as a “countercultural approach,” that includes dance, but cuts across artistic genre as a means of confronting the ideology of ability engrained in mainstream culture and in the professional dance world. These intersectional and activist works gesture toward an alternative aesthetic. Both the liberal inclusion and countercultural approaches laid the groundwork for a third approach I see developing in contemporary dance and performance art pieces.

I describe this developing approach as a “crip aesthetic.” In her 2003 article “Queering the Crip or Crippling the Queer,” disability performance scholar Carrie Sandahl describes crip embodiment as a “self-consciously crafted act,” a chosen affiliation, and an identity that one takes on through a process of “coming out” (43). She identifies that crip artists often sexualize themselves through their artistic expression (45), and bring attention to historic and present injustice in their work. As mentioned in the introduction, “crip” rejects normalization and inclusion, and instead finds difference as a radical point of pride. Eli Clare (1999), Tobin Siebers (2005), and Robert McRuer (2006) have likewise articulated related definitions of “crip,” and through this chapter, I will use their definitions and as a jumping off point for my own articulation of “crip” and its (our) role in disability arts.

I argue that the aesthetic qualities and ideological values of crip art existed before these identifiers and terminology took hold, and can exist in art created by artists and activists who did not claim the term. Thus, I will consider work of artists who do not necessarily claim the term “crip” to still be categorized as crip artists who aestheticize the values that I will discuss. My main example of this is the late Bob Flanagan, who was connected to the cystic fibrosis community as well as the leather and BDSM community.<sup>32</sup> Although his work took on many of the characteristics of “crip art,” this was not a term or group identifier when he was producing much of his art in the 1980s. Therefore, although he did not consciously choose crip identity in the “self-consciously crafted” (43) way that Sandahl discusses, he made art about his lived experience of disability and his work aestheticized what I have located as crip values. That said, Sandahl did not claim crip for Flanagan, nor did Flanagan publicly claim the term himself. I build upon the concept of crip culture,<sup>33</sup> which extends through art, activism, and culture to contextualize the way that crip artists take up many of the ideals of crip community to hone an unique aesthetic.

This chapter explores the qualities and possibilities of “crip aesthetics.” Crip aesthetics do not necessarily directly reference mainstream notions of disability (although some manifestations do), and do not appear to strive for inclusion in the mainstream popular media nor the larger art world. When these works enter the mainstream or larger art world, they do so on their own terms, and without apology or explanation. Throughout this chapter, I will draw from artists whose work exemplifies the qualities of crip aesthetics: the late Bob Flanagan, multimedia performance artist who used representations of masochism to express the connection between

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<sup>32</sup> Bill T. Jones is another example of an artist whose work embodies crip aesthetics, despite the fact that Jones did not claim “crip” himself.

<sup>33</sup> Although in her 1995 piece, Carol Gill writes about it as “Disability Culture,” I see many of the core values that Gill discussed as tenets of what I call in this chapter “Crip Culture.”

sexuality and disability, the Olimpias Performance Project directed by Petra Kuppens, an Ann Arbor-based artist collective with social justice initiatives that works across media, time, and geographic distance, Alice Sheppard and Laurel Lawson's choreographed dance piece "Snapshot," as well as some of the work that we practice in Bodies of Work, a disability art and culture network based in Chicago.

#### 4.1 **The Disabled Bodymind as Creative Material**

The artists I describe and analyze develop art that is born of their own disability experiences, and do not seek to appease audiences who are uninformed about disability politics and culture. In her article, "Considering Disability: Disability Phenomenology's Role in Revolutionizing Theatrical Space" (2002), Carrie Sandahl discusses the phenomenological nature of disability, and argues that disability embodiment and disability culture(s) can generate new aesthetic possibilities and artist-audience relationships for theater practice.

This chapter takes up Sandahl's provocation. In the twelve years since Sandahl wrote her article, disability art and culture has grown and developed. I pick up where Sandahl left off by describing and analyzing what happens when disability phenomenology is taken seriously into consideration. I argue that when crip aesthetics arise, they facilitate new power structures, intersectional content, ideology, and spatial remodeling. With these shifts, we are able to create work in new directions for our imagined future in the arts, and by extension, the world in which we live. Crip aesthetics incorporate disability and crip culture values and reflect some of the elements of inclusion and countercultural approaches, but uniquely express our embodied and em-minded experiences. This chapter takes the form of a manifesto, a call to disabled artists to direct their attention to radical developments in disability arts and an encouragement to make art out of crip bodyminds.

I begin by positioning myself within this work, and then state the value of articulating these qualities that we see already existing. I then explain the way that the nature of crip aesthetics necessitates a shift in power structure. From there, I define the qualities of crip aesthetics beginning with the audience accommodations, and proceed up through hierarchical levels of authority in the work on the stage and in the content, and in the artistic process. In the following chapter, I have chosen to describe and explore these various factors by starting in the audience and moving up through the power hierarchy, but they are all a part of a larger system at work. I close by putting forth a vision for what we need to propel this work in the future.

#### 4.2 **Queer Crip Positionality**

I come to this work with both a queer and disabled identity, and it is through this personal lens and theoretical orientation that I come to understand notions of crip futurity and aesthetics as decidedly queer. “Crip futurity” refers to Alison Kafer’s description in her book, *Feminist Queer Crip*. In the first chapter, she engages temporality, articulating the non-normative way that time operates for disabled people because of medicalization, prognosis, impairment, eugenic practices, and social expectations. She writes, “Crip time is flex time not just expanded but exploded; it requires reimagining our notions of what can and should happen in time, or recognizing how expectations of ‘how long things take’ are based on very particular minds and bodies” (27). Thus, this theory recognizes that the exclusion of disabled people is structural: disabled people are not considered in the pace or demands of society.

“Crip Futurity” is influenced by and works in accordance with Jack Halberstam’s notion of queer time in his 2005 book, *In a Queer Time and Place*, adding a distinct queerness to the concept. Through discussing prenatal testing, normative life expectations, and landmarks in development, Kafer makes the connection that, “‘The future,’ especially as figured through the

‘Child,’ is used to buttress able-bodied/able-minded heteronormativity” (29). Thus, the expression of both queer and crip aesthetics are co-constituent, as well as collaborative in the way that they defy norms.

In this chapter, and in my larger work, I use a definition of “queer” that is not exclusively indicative of sexuality and sexual preference, but rather relationship to the normative.<sup>34</sup> In his book, *Fear of a Queer Planet*, Michael Warner describes queer as, “An aggressive impulse of generalization; it rejects a minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-representation in favor of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal” (16). I use this definition for its expansiveness, as well as its relationship to normal. Thus, the queerness inherent in the crip art forms does not suggest that opposite sex desire cannot be represented in this art, nor that only people who identify as queer can participate in crip aesthetics. Rather, crip art is approached through a queer ethos, which includes a balking at normativity, and a reconfiguring of notions of family and success, sexuality, communication, and desire. Like crip culture, a queer ethos does not default nor aspire to mainstream values. As McRuer explains in *Crip Theory*, crip and queer existence are co-constitutive (2). Sandahl also describes the connection between queerness and disability, in identity, activism, and academics as a connection of “productive reciprocity” (25). It is through this lens that I develop the notion of crip aesthetics.

I also come to the question of the possibilities of crip aesthetics from my personal experience as an artist and “able-bodied disabled dancer.” I use this term to draw attention to the fact that the presence of disability in dance has often been about physical integration, and that the interpretation of integrated dance as solely a physical endeavor leaves many disabled dancers in

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<sup>34</sup> That said, there is overlap with sexuality.

a liminal space. Depending on the day and the sensory context, I am not always legible as a disabled dancer. That said, disability frames my approach to dance and is a generative player in my creative process. In a January, 2016 experimental performance with Chicago disabled dancer Kris Lenzo, for example, I experimented in crip relationship and mutuality that was not necessarily legible in my physicality. I used iterations of tics to experiment with aestheticizing disability in my choreography. My queer position also informed this piece. Where integrated dance and more normative dance forms focus on a male lifting the female, for example, I wanted to work in the piece without these markers of normative femininity and heteronormativity. Instead, we choreographed attempting a less hierarchical narrative, trying on each other's authentic movements and performing our own. My personal experience being categorized by default as a non-disabled dancer has also informed my proposal to create a form where we see disability as more expansive in dance, as it is understood in crip community: where crip mind, sensorium, and bodies all contribute (queerly, crip-ly) to the form.

#### 4.3 **We Need a Manifesto: Value in Articulation**

A manifesto claims goals, both ideological and material, and consolidates them into a single document. It makes note of what is already happening, but also imagines a future where we realize these goals more fully. We need a manifesto to encourage artists to take up crip aesthetics in their own art practices, as well as in art incubation and education.

I understand the creation of a manifesto to be an opportunity to learn to ask questions that lead us to a space of possibility and expansiveness. Through asking questions, I hope to invite people to understand crip aesthetics as an emerging concept that has room to develop. I do not seek to define something that already is fully formed, but rather to draw attention to that which

exists and begin a process of collaboration and questioning that opens space for crip artists to continue to experiment with this work.

Aspects of crip aesthetics have been present in art for decades, but they have not been articulated, and often have been categorized outside of disability arts. I aim to make space to consolidate and articulate these ideas and qualities of crip aesthetics, and recognize where the genre has need for further development. Elements of crip art exist and point towards a future that I imagine, but often are contained in an “uncripped” space where some elements of access are missing, thus creating a liminal space. Although strands of crip art and aesthetics exist, most representations do not adopt the full ideology of crip art. I aim to pull apart these multiple aspects of our realities as crip artists to articulate the contours of these aesthetics.

I am motivated by Carol Gill’s impact in defining the contours of disability culture in the 1990s. Although she had spoken and written about it in the past, many of her ideas culminated in her 1995 piece “A Psychological View of Disability Culture.” In this piece, she notes that her early writings had made such an impact that people would often pull out their copies upon meeting her. Yet, Gill’s work did not *create* disability culture; it articulated what was already happening, and in doing so, created more awareness and intention around the reality of this cultural phenomenon. My hope is that articulating the values I see developing in crip aesthetics will have similar impact.

#### 4.4 **Shifting Power: New Hierarchies and Crip Aesthetics**

The ideological framework of crip aesthetics I describe permeates through audience, performers, performance content and structure, and reorganizes power structure. Hierarchically, whereas non-disabled leadership in art production is hegemonic, the development of crip art seeks to subvert systemic non-disabled leadership. Crips and other people with politicized and

marginalized identities take positions of power, such as choreographers, directors, main decision-makers, and innovators. This power structure informs the aesthetics; instead of simply replacing non-disabled directors for disabled ones, for example, the disabled people who take up authority positions have politicized identity and use their disability-informed politics in their processes of making art and collaborating.

I follow Alison Kafer in her encouragement of fluidity and debate in the terms that she uses and the phenomena she describes. She suggests raising questions to further describe phenomena instead of creating rigid definitions.<sup>35</sup> In seeking to describe and analyze art forms, I, too, have often found myself with more questions than answers. I take up this same method in my own work, often asking questions where I see moments of dissonance and a lack of clarity in the art forms and approaches I discuss. I ask who crip aesthetics are for, and what makes them “crip.” I pull out moments that contradict themselves and contemplate why the paradox is arising. I seek to ask questions that do not yet have answers, and questions that we are currently exploring as the art form evolves. By beginning the discussion and asking the questions, I seek to shape critical thinking and articulation about an art vision for the present and future. Although some of my research takes a stab at “answering” some of these questions, these discussions will undoubtedly shift as the landscape of disability arts and crip aesthetics expands and takes on new shapes.

I look to Petra Kuppers’s work to ground this hypothetical description of power structure in praxis. In her work as director of The Olimpias Performance Project, a personal art practice and a collective, she creates space for disability collaboration to drive the work. Her position as a disabled woman influences the aesthetic itself, informing the way she thinks about access, and

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<sup>35</sup> I discuss this method at greater length in the introduction.

whom she invites to participate. The project takes place in various venues: performances, workshops, and more informal gatherings. The group is loosely-structured and porous, which allows for a spectrum of participation and commitment. In 2008, The Olimpias took on Tiresias, a project and ongoing process with several incarnations, which expanded access physically and geographically, as well as created the opportunity to explore the same character from mythology from multiple media.<sup>36</sup> The project takes up the peripheral character of Tiresias, and centers this character, finding the character's blindness, gender-shifting, and to be a point of power. In describing the character, the Tiresias website says:

Who is Tiresias? The figure of Tiresias penetrates Greek drama - the hermaphroditic shape shifter who has lived both as a man, as Zeus's priest, and as a woman, as a prostitute of great renown. Tiresias wields his and her staff throughout *Antigone*, *Oedipus*, *The Bacchae*, through Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and many other canonical texts where his blindness, her cripdom, offers special status as advisor to the mighty. (Kuppers "Tiresias")

The centering of the character of Tiresias is thus an opportunity for this group to explore the complexity of a disabled, queer character, and demonstrates a commitment to bringing peripheral stories, especially crip stories, out from the margins. As I will describe, this performance group explores the story of Tiresias from many angles and media.

To expand the demographics of individuals who could participate in the project and to increase participation in general, there were photography, writing, and dance workshops in

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<sup>36</sup> Tiresias has several iterations, and so can be confusing about which one I am discussing. When I talk about the film, I will use italics (*Tiresias*), when I discuss the project as a whole, I will not use italics (Tiresias), and when I cite the website, I write it as "(Kuppers "Tiresias")." When I talk about the character, I will say, "The character Tiresias." Although there are several stages of the project and several outcomes (exhibits, performance, film, etc.), it is one large multi-faceted project.

various cities across the country, as well as in a Center for Independent Living and an undergraduate classroom in Ann Arbor. Thus, Tiresias work is diffused across time and space. There was also a listserv that allowed people to participate outside of the boundaries of time and space, and to offer ideas and thoughts through connecting with and writing on the listserv. This demonstrates a commitment to break geographic barriers that are often associated with performance, as well as a range of the level of interaction that participants could take on. Her position of “authority” in this domain allowed her to disperse power among collaborators who may not have been able to participate otherwise, subverting normative non-disabled hierarchy.

Bodies of Work, a group in which I participate, is a laboratory space for artists and a consortium of disability organizations in the Chicago area that is committed to the production of work about the lived experience of disability. This group, like the Olimpias, diffuses power to make production more effective and sustainable as a crip-led network. In this group, we collaborate to produce art from the extended community of disabled artists. Although hierarchies and funding exist and drive a lot of what this group can do, the distribution of power and the desire to bring people in as organizers and leaders both distribute power and make the work sustainable for most of us—people with jobs and families, our own research, art, disabilities and limitations—to be able to be a part of art production.

#### 4.5 **Cultivating the Audience We Want: Crippling the Space**

Creating access for an audience, an act I will call “cripping the space” is active and dynamic. It changes based on who is present and the needs we uncover as an event unfolds. A crip space is one that acknowledges and provides physical access, in the case of ramps, elevators, and accessible seating, and auditory description, as well as linguistic access through interpreters or captioning, and other forms of access and accommodations that create the meaning that

disabled people are welcome. For example, a crip space might respect its disability community through keeping the lights dim, allowing people to come and go as they please, and respecting the need to make non-normative sounds and movements. Sandahl develops “crip” as a verb in “Queering the Crip or Crippling the Queer,” explaining that, “Crippling spins mainstream representations or practices to reveal able-bodied assumptions and exclusionary effects. Both queering and crippling expose the arbitrary delineation between normal and defective and the negative social ramifications of attempts to homogenize humanity” (37). I use this term as well to conceptualize the way that creating accommodations often means putting a crip spin an otherwise non-disabled space. Without accommodations that make it possible for crips to attend events, events cannot be considered crip art. Kafer writes, “Claiming crip, then, can be a way of acknowledging that we all have bodies and minds with shifting abilities, and wrestling with the political meanings and histories of such shifts” (13). In this context, “cripping the space” has both physical and ideological counterparts.

Ideologically, crippling the space fits within Alison Kafer’s (2013) political/relational model of disability, incorporating less-visible disabilities that are often overlooked in the creation of accommodation. Accommodation may take in notions of crip time, many of which may be influenced by trauma, mania, depression, PTSD, bodily discomfort, chemical sensitivities, and incontinence. This approach of crippling the space, one that is consistent with Kafer’s desire not to define disability and determine who may require accommodations, but builds community through refusing to isolate physical disability as the only group that benefits from accommodation, while also creating the structures for full participation for other non-physically disabled people. This approach acknowledges that access needs are both environmental and social. Building on Tobin Siebers’s theory of complex embodiment, the

political/relational model clearly places disability into a political, social, and dynamic context. It also asserts that both our impairments and disabilities are social, refusing to create a hard line between the two. Crippling the space is an essential piece of dictating who is able to attend, and how the work is received and experienced. Crip spaces usually require accessibility that extends past ADA standards of accessibility, and rather take in the full gamut of disability needs, accepting that disability and accommodation are rarely clean cut.

The Bodies of Work team was faced with an issue of audience accommodation in the fifth annual integrated dance performance, *Counterbalance*. In previous years, the dancers performed at Access Living, the Center for Independent Living in Chicago. In these performances, the aisles were wide, and the lights were dim, and the seats were positioned in a three-quarter round so that audience members could see each other, giving the audience a more participatory role and contributing to the community feel. Most of the attendees were familiar with the space, as it is one where many disability cultural events happen, and so had a feeling for what they could expect. In Access Living performances, the doors remain open so people can come and go, and people of all ages attend, standing in the back, sitting on the floor, moving around chairs and their bodies as necessary.

In 2015, *Counterbalance* was moved to the National Museum of Mexican Art to work in conjunction with the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ADA events. This performance took place on a proscenium stage, directing the audience to look forward, and deepening the divide between audience and performers. The seats, although moveable, were arranged as if fixed, the lights went completely dark when the performance began. Ushers guarded the door at the beginning of the performance, and tickets were not free, as in previous years. Although this presentation may have appeared more professional from the outside, a patron commented at the end, “You

uncrippled the space.” An event that the community had assumed would be accessible, because of the connection to Bodies of Work and their experience with the event in past years, was suddenly less accessible.

The change in location was both subversive and problematic for Bodies of Work and the community that the group has cultivated over the years. On one hand, changing location brought in new people and opened up a collaboration with a new space. Bringing art into a new neighborhood can attract new people, as well as locals of the neighborhood. It helps circulate art and ideas to a new community, which exposes people to disability art and increases visibility. However, a new meaning is produced in a space that does not adhere to the usual accommodations that Bodies of Work provides, and has provided throughout the years. Because the audience came in with certain access expectations, finding out that they would not be met was distressing to some. For disabled people, being able to expect certain accommodations is not just a preference, but can also be an issue of safety. This also created sustainability concerns for Bodies of Work: we can continue to produce art because we expect a core group of attendees that we have cultivated over the years. Hosting a less-accessible event was thus inhospitable on several levels.

Certain features of accessibility may compromise notions of “professionalism” and “prestige,” from the mainstream art world, but crip art often shifts these values in favor of greater access. For example, art productions that are not concerned with crip accessibility may perform with lights fully down, have expensive seating, ushers gatekeeping the doors, and strobe lights, among other inaccessible, though common characteristics. Although these effects are common in professional art, and do not intend to discriminate, they “uncrip” the audience and make it a space that may not be safe for a crip audience. Crip performances may have attendees can stand

in the back or come and go freely with no explanation, lights that are dim but not off, sound from audio description, a sign language interpreter on the stage, and affordable tickets. In their 2006 piece, Terry Galloway, Donna Nudd, and Carrie Sandahl, call this revision of the more standard (and often less accessible) professional practices the Ethic of Accommodation. They write, “Genuine inclusiveness requires a willingness to make changes to core beliefs, practices and aesthetics” (Galloway et al. 228). That said, the process of crippling spaces does not suggest that every space becomes immediately accessible for each person—this is unreasonable and likely impossible. Rather, crippling the space means a commitment to access, the openness to change what does not work, and the willingness to shift as we learn.

In the multi-faceted Tiresias project, the *Olimpias* cripps the audience through calling into question what an audience even is: by creating both physically- and virtually-accessible spaces, the audience can participate without even being present. The various performance/exhibit formats of the project include a live performance, a photo installation, a film, and text from a list-serv that built conversation around “what it means to be seen and to see, to be naked and exposed, comforted and challenged, to touch boundaries” (Kuppers “Tiresias”). Therefore, not only was the work more accessible for collaboration, but also for audience viewing. In this work, “audience” extends far past theater attendees. The “audience” can be online, out of space and time, in many geographical places, and can choose to view the components of the project that are accessible and interesting to them. Had this been a stage show, the project would be bound by time, but because of the many media that contain it, people continue to experience and view the Tiresias project in several of its iterations. This work is unique in that it not only demonstrates the expansiveness of accommodations, but also the way that technology affects the meaning and role of an audience.

Tobin Siebers's concept of complex embodiment and Alison Kafer's political/relational model are woven throughout crip aesthetics in the Tiresias Project. Siebers writes, "Embodiment seen complexly understands disability as an epistemology that rejects the temptation to value the body as anything other than what it was and that embraces what the body has become and will become relative to the demands on it, whether environmental, representational, or corporeal" (27). In this piece, attending as an in-person audience member is not the only way to support and experience the project, and is not valued over other means of participation. Ideologically, the liberal inclusion model that I discussed in Chapter 2 still fits squarely into Siebers's ideology of ability, in its reinforcement of normative power relations and binary constructions. Crip aesthetics in Tiresias therefore use a model of complex embodiment that Siebers offers as a way to critique the ideology of ability and acknowledge the embodied realities of disability.

Within the ideology of ability, Siebers unpacks the way that the preference for able-bodiedness within normative culture can deny the very humanity of disabled people, as well as simplify disabled lives and experiences (10). The ideology of ability maintains the notion that disability serves a specific purpose, and that disabled people exist as living learning experiences for non-disabled people. Complex embodiment provides the subject a way out of this bind. Complex embodiment does not individualize the disabled experience, but rather situates it within the social acknowledging the effects of the environment and society on a person. To acknowledge embodied reality, in this context, is to connect disability to the experience of oppression, and to avoid normalizing disability. Instead, this approach brings attention to disability, and the disabled bodymind, refusing to normalize it or measure it up against non-disability. In the context of the Tiresias audience, the fluidity with which the audience can

participate, and the spectrum of involvement, is consciously non-normative and breaks down hierarchies between the artists and the audience.

#### 4.6 **Beyond Audience: Accommodations on the Stage**

Accommodations in crip art extend past the audience experience, and encompass the collaboration process, ethics, payment, and engagement with accessibility of the stage and audience. “‘Actual Lives’ and the Ethic of Accommodation” by Galloway et al., unpacks tenets of access in artistic spaces, explaining that an ethic of accommodation is, “Intimately tied to disability politics, which seeks to accommodate difference rather than ‘tolerate’ it or smooth out our rough edges” (228). In crip art, acknowledging and accommodating performing artists with access needs is essential, and challenges expectations of the roles that disabled people can play in art and performance, as well as where accommodation may be necessary.

One of the more tangible accommodation issues that Bodies of Work has encountered are the unique challenges of accommodating financial needs of the artists whose work we produce. A part of the Bodies of Work mission is to compensate artists fairly for their work, but artists who rely on government assistance can often not be paid a large sum of money without jeopardizing the assistance that they receive. On the outset, this creates a conflict in accommodation, but has been remedied through often paying artists in small increments and consulting with the artist about what is best for their particular situation.

In Tiresias, the Olimpias creates geographic access to artists through creating projects that do not necessitate travel for collaboration. Travel can often be complicated, inaccessible, and impossible for disabled artists, which can limit collaborators. Petra Koppers and the Olimpias take geographical boundaries into consideration as an issue of access. Through giving opportunities to artists to submit work online through a listserv, for example, they open up

opportunity to create art out of time and space. This recognizes that artists are not able to travel, rehearse regularly, or otherwise expend themselves in ways that the art world and the non-disabled mainstream demands. The commitment to access takes up the notion of “flexibility” that Kafer discusses in her development of crip time. Alison Kafer writes, “This idea of conserving energy, of anticipating, can be read as queer in that it bucks American ideals of productivity at all costs, of sacrificing one’s body for work. In other words, how might we begin to read these practices of self-care not as preserving one’s body for productive work but as refusing such regimes in order to make room for pleasure” (39)? Crip aesthetics honors that time and space are different concepts for disabled people and creates an open space for allowing aspects of the performance to exist outside of linear time.<sup>37</sup> What, then, does “success” look like in crip aesthetics? Can we even call it “success” if the very notions of success are tied to American ideals and notions of normal to which disabled people will never measure up?

#### 4.7 **Intersectional Aesthetics: The Queer Crip Dance**

In artistic content, crip aesthetics move away from single-identity politics and find artistic richness in complexity and intersections of identity. Kafer writes that recognizing these intersections opens the opportunity for coalitional politics and politicizes disability. In the “Ethnic of Accommodation,” Galloway et al., write about the way that the need for accommodation seeps into the way that artists interact and generate content, while influencing factors such as humor, time, and creativity. I build upon this idea of creativity and coalition that stems from complexity through my understanding of the way that crip aesthetics influence artistic content.

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<sup>37</sup> Tangential to this is the way that the Internet has vastly changed the landscape of art. The advent of the Internet and the YouTube era has dispersed art in many ways, and there are likely artists doing this experimental work that I am unaware of and do not come into the scope of this paper. Artists are turning to digital media and online communities as outlets for art in a way and continue to explore the terrain in ways that were not as accessible even ten years ago.

Although it might seem on surface level that it is possible to simplify integrated dance as solely fitting into the inclusion approach, crip aesthetics can, at times, be present in integrated dance work. The work is more complex than the rhetoric surrounding it, and aspects of it sometimes do fit more a crip aesthetic in representation; the critique, however, as I demonstrated in ““The Art of Being Together,”” however, continues to inspirationalize the groups. Because of the range of choreographers and dancers, groups like AXIS Dance Company take on aesthetics ranging from the inclusive approach to a crip aesthetics approach. For example, the AXIS performance *Full of Words* displays aspects of crip embodiment and disability culture. The piece happens in several parts, but toward the middle, the focus is on Rodney Bell dancing from a reclining chair. His movement is impaired, as he visibly moves his legs with his arms with grace and intention. He slides down the chair upside down, allowing the chair to shift with his body. Making his way back up the chair, it flips over, and he lifts himself back up, taking the chair with him. The piece reads as an exploration of crip space, and the way that space, objects, and time are shaped by the presence of impairment. In the second part of the piece, non-disabled dancer Sonsheree Giles joins Bell in the easy chair, exploring the relational aspect of disability. The tension between the seemingly evident crip aesthetic and the insistence that the group does not create pieces about disability creates a tension.

The *Olimpias* itself addresses its conscious crip aesthetic by involving intersectional history of fluid gender and disability in the main ideas behind the Tiresias Project. The description of the project reads: “Tiresias is a crip show - and much more than that. In our show, we take Tiresias out of the background fabric of history. Now Tiresias and his disability, her undecidable bodily status, the malleability of his body, gender, her tri-pedal step and his blind/seeing eyes become the focal point of disability cultural work” (Kuppers “Tiresias”). The

act of bringing this character, rich in intersections of gender, disability, sexuality, age, to the forefront, allow artists find joy and complexity in the richness of the character. Thus, the Olimpias queers and crips this character, politicizing Tiresias's identity and drawing focus to this often secondary character in mythology and re-characterizing Tiresias as an ancestor in queer and crip history. In centering Tiresias, they center queer and crip existence in an unique and powerful way.

The aesthetic of *Tiresias*, the "dancepoetryvideo" (Kuppers "Tiresias") portion of the Tiresias Project is intersectional in nature. Participants in the piece embody diverse identities, including factors of race, age, gender, and apparent and non-apparent disabilities. These people literally intersect in an experimental art space, overlapping with one another, taking turns embodying the elusive role of Tiresias. A long red piece of fabric lies in the space, and artists, some clothed and some nude, enter the space and interact with this fabric, dancing and rolling across the floor. Participants also enter and exit a wheelchair that remains in the space. As this happens, poetry is heard overhead. The film functions as a simultaneous ode to the sensuality of the disabled body and an expression of the complexity in impairment. The artists demonstrate this through both displaying aesthetically beautiful choreography with while also engaging the "difficult" questions that are often avoided in the social model. For example, the unseen narrator says, "Do you ever get tired of this body?" while bodies, clothed and nude, dance in the image with a red fabric cascading through the scene. One at a time, artists slowly move in wheelchairs in the image as the words "creaks," "groans," and others appear across the screen. The narrator says, "It creaks, it groans, it leaks, it moans, it's weeks since I felt like I used to." Jim Ferris's poetry spans time, combining relevant questions about the disabled experience with research

about the character of Tiresias. The engagement thus exists in multiple timeframes and historical and mythological contexts.

The spoken poetry contains lines like those above about changing nature of impairment and the challenges and frustrations of inhabiting a disabled body, but the beauty in disability is simultaneously present. Camera angles provide close-ups of Petra Kuppers and Neil Marcus while the overhead narration-turned-audio-description says, “Light-skinned man and woman close, his hand sharp and tenderly touches hair.” Although this is a seemingly heterosexual pairing, the non-normativity of the pairing makes it subversive, and, using Warner’s definition, it makes it queer. Queerness, in this piece, is not the absence of heterosexuality, but rather the engagement with non-normativity. This close-up of affection and sensuality among disabled people is uncommon, as are the images of nudity among disabled people. This piece re-frames cultural norms and taboos and displays affection, sensuality, and disability as intersecting and co-constitutive. Participants alternate taking up the Tiresias figure, one figure intersecting with another, demonstrating that the figure of Tiresias is all these things at once.

This intersectionality is integral to the *Olimpias*’s aesthetic and demonstrates that the experience of disability is never simply about a singular identity. Using the literally changing, shapeshifting figure of Tiresias, and as its guide, we see a physical manifestation of intersectionality as the collaborators embody this complexity.

While *Tiresias* is a performance project, we can also see the use of intersectionality in a Laurel Lawson and Alice Sheppard’s dance piece “Snapshot.” Whereas duets in integrated dance are almost always between a non-disabled and a disabled person, often a woman and a man, Lawson and Sheppard work wryly to queer and crip these forms. Acknowledging the downfalls of the well-worn tropes of integrated dance, the two disabled women interact flirtatiously, lifting

and somersaulting over one another. They demonstrate the way that sexuality as well as strength and playfulness can be present and integral to a dance piece even with no man present to lift and display them. They thus use both a crip and queer consciousness to explore the boundaries of crip dance and draw attention to what makes it more liberating and interesting without these tropes. Through creating their own technique and playing with the cliché tropes, they expose the way that compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory able-bodiedness work to re-produce stereotypes in dance.

#### 4.8 **We're Not Talking to You: Unpacking the Referent in Crip Aesthetics**

In Chapter 2, I discussed the way that many liberal inclusion groups defended their ability to be professionals in the mainstream dance world. I looked at their origins and the way that they distanced themselves from disability arts in favor of being able to be a part of a mainstream art culture instead. The crip aesthetic value in avoiding the sought-after title of “professional,” means that aesthetics or visual anomalies are often not explained for the benefit of the mainstream. A crip aesthetic does not fit into western notions of productivity, may require more accommodation and therefore more money, more time for interpreters and audio description. Because of the rigidity of the mainstream art world, a crip aesthetic does not strive for these notions of “professionalism”. Adopting a framework of crip aesthetics disconnects us from the notions of productivity and success that bind us to hegemonic norms.

Although art is inevitably informed by culture, artists who use crip aesthetics do not usually model their own work on non-disabled art and culture nor aspire to become a part of it. Like in Kafer’s political/relational model, disability in crip aesthetics is not conceptualized as a lack, but rather material to work with and expansiveness in opportunity. In crip aesthetics, art is born from the lived experience of disability. Because of this, the work often is not in direct

conversation with non-disability and thus has a less apparent referent in its content.

Professionalism shifts in a framework of crip aesthetics when there are not such rigid guidelines associated with vying for normal. Crip aesthetics blur boundaries of art in both form and content, which often makes it unapologetically esoteric.

The documentary, *Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist* (1997), directed by Kirby Dick, is an art piece in itself, but also serves as a metacommentary on the life and work of masochist and performance artist Bob Flanagan. This documentary takes the viewer through Flanagan's life and experience with cystic fibrosis through his art and his s/m relationship with Sheree Rose, demonstrating the way that he uses his unique body and its impairment in his art, as well as the way that it influences his sexuality. He openly discusses pain and the influence that it has on his art, and although he recognizes that the environment and social factors are a large part of disability, he also challenges the viewer to look at the under-discussed complexity of impairment. His approach to disability takes on a political/relational approach that recognizes that there is less clear separation between impairment and disability, asserting both are actually fully embodied yet social phenomena.

In Flanagan's 1993 piece "Visiting Hours," performed/installed first at Santa Monica Museum of Art, the audience became co-creative with Flanagan, interacting with him as he lies in a hospital bed. The participant asks him questions through a phone and he answers. Who is the audience in this piece? Are there only participants? This blurring of boundaries and challenging of mainstream art disciplines in the art is one of the basic tenets of performance art. Not only do his answers provide information about his identity and disability, but the questions that the audience asks him also do so. Although Kafer did not conceptualize the political/relational model until many years later, his work takes up ideas in the political/relational that states that,

“Disability is experienced in and through relationships; it does not occur in isolation” (8).

Flanagan’s performance work in its engagement with the audience also highlighted this relational aspect of disability.

“Visiting Hours,” however, was not a simple performance piece of Flanagan’s. The piece took place in a gallery, asking the audience to engage kinesthetically with multiple media of art. At one point in the evening called “the ascension,” mixing religious imagery with s/m, Sheree Rose suspends Flanagan’s body from the ceiling. His body on such bold display, a body marked with both sexual and medical practices is exposed and public. In another segment of the exhibition, a large photography piece is displayed in which small square images of Flanagan’s face cover the frame. Each face is a reaction shot after he was struck or slapped, which asks the question of which is the art: the moment of impact? The photography? The compilation of all of the photos? The bulk of his art asks the audience, to engage in metacommentary about the purpose of art, and the role of interactive and performance art. Although his public displays of both sexuality and medicalization may have sparked mainstream debates, as well as engaged with other topics in avant garde art of the time, his art did not educate the mainstream; it was created in collaboration with Sheree Rose without apology or explanation, allowing audiences to engage how they desired.

In his almost ostentatious shirking of normal, as well as explicit acknowledgement of the way that his disability and sexuality are mutually informed, Bob Flanagan’s work art inhabits a queer crip orientation.<sup>38</sup> In Carrie Sandahl’s 2000 piece “Bob Flanagan: Taking It Like a Man,” she writes, “Flanagan’s self-objectification flaunts his disabled body: thin, often hooked up to an

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<sup>38</sup> Although Bob Flanagan’s partnership was a heterosexual one, the couple’s outward practice of kink and sadomasochism, as well as the way that they subverted gender norms, I would argue, are quite queer.

oxygen tank, and scarred. By erotically objectifying his disabled male body, Flanagan again revised masculine masochism” (100-101). Thus, he subverts the medical gaze that often objectifies disabled people, harnessing power through insisting that the audience look at pain, disability, and non-normative sexuality, while simultaneously challenging constructions of masculinity. Flanagan, however, does not attempt to speak directly to the medical complex or the structures or people that hurt and exclude him, nor does he try to “prove” his masculinity. Instead, he adopts his own unique aesthetics and sexuality. His work does not simply reclaim his own masculinity, however. Most of Flanagan’s work is documentation of his sadomasochistic relationship with Sheree Rose. He literally claims power through his submission, creating complex power relationships. Embracing a crip aesthetic thus frees him from continuing to push into the mainstream and having to defend and explain himself. In a crip aesthetic, he uses crip humor about death, pain, prognosis without apology.

Using his own condition as a springboard for his art, Bob Flanagan’s sharp humor is present even in discussing pain and prognosis. Carol Gill names disability humor as a core value in her 1995 piece, “A Psychological View of Disability Culture,” describing it as, “the ability to laugh at the oppressor and our own situations, to find something absurdly hilarious in almost anything, however dire.” The documentary depicts Flanagan’s art and life with cystic fibrosis and weaves his wry humor throughout it. For instance, in the beginning of the documented, he is represented singing a Mary Poppins parody on stage. He performs bare-chested, with a hospital gown pinned around his neck and off his back like a cape, singing “Supermasochistic Bob has cystic fibrosis, he should have died when he was young but he was too precocious how much longer he will live is anyone’s prognosis, supermasochistic Bob has cystic fibrosis.” He coughs, and then continues, “Um diddle diddle diddle, I’m gonna die....” His humor, sexuality, and

disability are central to his life and art, and his willingness to make jokes about prognosis and imminent death reflect Disability cultural values, as well as a crip aesthetic. The film shows a part of his life that emphasizes his art in a way that is intricately connected to his sexuality and his disability and relationship to sadomasochism. Flanagan asks the question, however, of whether getting closer to our desired art forms and independent aesthetics necessitates narrowing the audience. In defining ourselves, are we becoming more esoteric? It instead embraces the esoteric, and leaves space for experimentation and growth.

However, though esoteric and unapologetic, Flanagan's work was also paradoxical. I previously discussed the way that crip art does not aspire to be included in the mainstream art world, but many of Bob Flanagan's and Sheree Rose's performance pieces were shown in mainstream places such as the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) and the Santa Monica Museum of Art. Did this participation in mainstream "high art" venues immediately place Flanagan's work outside of crip art? Can Bob Flanagan still embody a crip aesthetic while performing at MOMA, or is the very act of inhabiting such a mainstream space an anti-crip aesthetic? The MOMA, for example, featured alternative art, however, there was still a standard and a "norm" for avant garde work, and the space was still highly established and held in high esteem. What privileges did Flanagan take up to be able to be in these spaces? Although Flanagan was a marginalized artist in many ways, his work asked many of the questions that avant garde art was asking at the time, questions about the body and about identity. His whiteness, as well as the fact that he was in a heterosexual-appearing partnership, despite the non-normativity of their dynamics, undoubtedly also gave him privilege.<sup>39</sup> That said, Flanagan's work still pushed the

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<sup>39</sup> It is important to note that I do not consider privilege a "bad" thing in this context. It can be valuable to the disability community for people to enact privilege and enter spaces that are

boundaries in this avant garde space, providing crip aesthetics to mainstream audiences to whom they were new, creating more visibility.

How much compromising for the mainstream can happen while still having the art fit within crip art? What happens when we become what we resist? I would still argue that Flanagan's work was "crip art," and actually does not discount the characteristics that I have already named, but is evidence of the complexity and paradoxical nature of disability. Thus, I ask these questions not to find answers, but to pave the way for us to start conceptualizing the complexity that lies in crip aesthetics.

#### 4.9 **Crip Aesthetics: Blurring Media**

Without the pressure to conform to non-disabled notions of professionalism, crip aesthetics have the freedom to blur boundaries of media, discipline, and content. Multi-media approaches to art in crip aesthetics blur the categories often used to define art and make it difficult to define and articulate in a single discipline. This characteristic is also in line with tenets of performance art, that, as Sally Banes writes, "seems to defy definition" (2). In her book *Subversive Expectations* (1998) she writes a history of New York-based performance art from 1976 to 1985. She writes about the blurring of media boundaries as "nonspecialization" (4), looking to concurrent cultural influences in theater in the 1970s and early 1980s that fed into this phenomena. She writes:

All of these factors contributed to a hybrid, or 'intermedia,' situation, a provisional arena in which an artist in one medium could work in another or borrow structures from another or work in several at once. A musician might tell stories; a filmmaker might

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uncommon for disabled and crip artists to show there work. The fact that Flanagan was able to exist in those spaces created visibility for crip aesthetics and circulated ideas to new spaces.

make a film composed of a scrim, lights, and moving human bodies; a sculptor might manipulate time; dancers might act, sing, or tell jokes. (5)

What is the relationship between performance art and disability? As seen in *Vital Signs: Crip Culture Talks Back* (1995), performance art was influential in the conception of disability art and culture. The blurring of boundaries and multi-media aesthetics that crip artists create correlate in part to performance art and its influence, but also to the nature of crip embodiment. Because impairments often change over time, it is common for disabled artists to change media, or use several at once. Because art was developed in large part by able-bodied and able-minded norms, disabled people have often had to occupy multiple artistic platforms to be able to pursue it. This necessitates that crip artists progress and develop their art in ways counter to those of professional mainstream artists.

*Tiresias* works intimately with layers of various media. The film layers poetry from poet Jim Ferris, dance, physical storytelling, verbal and written work, and uses access features such as audio description as a part of the aesthetic. The filmmakers use audio description, usually an accommodation reserved for blind and visually-impaired patrons, instead to create a medium that blurs the boundaries between accommodation and aesthetic, and in that, the audience and the performers. In this piece, the narrator audibly voices the audio description as well as the overhead poetry narration, and performers move in relationship to the audio description. Here, the audio description does not fully embody either access or aesthetic. The piece implicitly asks the question of what happens when we embrace an aesthetic of access? How do we find practicality in the aesthetic, and aesthetics in the practical? But also, the incompleteness of the audio description asks the question of: can any experience be fully accommodated? These questions may frustrate administrators who may fall into the false notion that anything can be

fully accessible. This feature of the film puts forth commentary about how there exists in disability culture a false notion that any experience can be accommodated for. Crip culture acknowledges that this is not possible, but also claims that it is part of the experience of disability to continue to adjust for disability (Galloway, et al.). Thus, the *Olimpias* challenges disability culture with crip culture.

Likewise, captioning is layered onto the video of *Tiresias*. Like the audio description, it does not function fully as an access tool. Not every word is captioned, and from some of the overhead narration, only certain words are pulled out and layered onto the screen. It is elusive: it is layered as a part of the aesthetic and references access as well, though does not fully present in either category. The project itself is multifaceted and occupies several media at once, creating a compilation that sees disability from various vantage points.

Multi-media art is not just about discipline but also reflects the multi-faceted aspects of identity, and blurs typical performance conventions. Bob Flanagan blurred the line between artist and actor, subversively demonstrating that both are co-producers in art. He and his partner and co-creator Sheree Rose use photography, video, and performance art, intertwining sex, pain, disability, and art. Against these multi-media backdrops, he asked the audience to engage through the visual, auditory, and kinesthetic sense. He put his own body on display as an art object, as well as engaged with the audience, asking the audience to become an active participant in his art. His art serves as artistic and sexual expression, as well as performance, visual art, and human interaction.

The documentary *Sick: The Life and Times of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist* (1997) opens with Bob Flanagan reading from a script. He reads a bio of himself, saying, “Bob Flanagan, artist, masochist and one of the longest-living survivors of Cystic Fibrosis lost his

battle this week with the killer disease, a genetic disorder of the lungs and pancreas, that both plagued and empowered the provocative performer throughout his difficult but productive life” (1997). This opening blurs the lines between living and dead, discusses disability and sexuality as key players not only in his life, but in his survival; the interrelationship of disability is both a “plague” and a source of empowerment for him.

Though Flanagan does not focus on disability community or culture, he looks to other common representational questions at the time about the body, and its role in the performance art world, and also was in community with other people with cystic fibrosis. Flanagan worked for many summers as a counselor at a summer camp for kids with cystic fibrosis. The film depicts him singing parodies of songs about cystic fibrosis, playing an acoustic guitar. He is kid-friendly while maintaining his usual crip humor. His work constantly invokes the way that the disabled body has been medicalized, shifting authority—the patient becomes the artist who controls the scene—whether it be at an open mic night, summer camp, sex dungeon, or the MOMA. Often requiring great control and stamina, as well as explicitly vulnerable and intimate in nature, the work repositions the self as the expert on the body and sexuality, weaving in questions about disability and sexuality throughout.

#### 4.10 **A Manifesto**

I have intentionally chosen examples that are not concurrent in time or social context, and that use varying media, in an effort to demonstrate the diversity that crip art can take, and to argue that the notion of “crip art” and the ability to produce crip art is not a new phenomenon. It has often been argued that crip aesthetics needed to be preceded by the liberal inclusive approaches to be able to exist. In fact, I went into this project believing the same. Although many of these art forms build upon each other, and although visibility of pioneers like Mary Verdi-

Fletcher likely made the success of disabled dancers after her smoother or more possible, the existence of work like Bob Flanagan's existing in the 1980s is evidence that one does not necessarily need the other to exist. These stages are not linear building blocks that are dependent on one another. They, like disability culture, are interdependent. In the spirit of Carol Gill's "A Psychological View of Disability Culture," I reiterate that this work has already happened, is happening, and will continue to happen. I have not created a movement or a new vision. Disabled artists have been developing and creating crip art independent from the mainstream for decades.

I believe that through discussing crip aesthetics as an artistic agenda, we will come to a place where we can nurture the next generation of crip aesthetic artists and articulate our cultural and artistic values using the contours that I have laid out. It is through perceiving the disabled body and mind as a source of creative material—rather than a metaphor, a pawn for the non-disabled mainstream's transformation, and a jigsaw piece of the "diversity puzzle"—that we will find our own aesthetics.

## 5. REACHING FORWARD:

### A VISION FOR CRIPPING PERFORMANCE

#### 5.1 The Call for more Questions

I believe in the power of asking provocative questions. Academically, my process of raising questions that have no clear answer is critical to interrogating and destabilizing the structures that are nearly invisible because society assumes they *just are*. As Melanie Yergeau said in her 2014 keynote speech at the Computers and Writing Conference, “I want to disable all the things.” I pick up her motive and I, too, seek to question, disable, queer, and uproot systems of oppression. I do this to model the kinds of questioning we should all be doing to challenge ourselves to push the boundaries of art. Therefore, in this project, I have asked challenging questions throughout to question constructs and grow the potential for art-making. As Jim Charlton says, disability is paradoxical:

In fact, if you seriously want to approach the subject of disability, to really know it better you ought to expect that quite quickly the superficial perceptions will become less comforting and will yield to unease... To unlock the contradictions, the paradoxes, the predicament that seem to entangle, obscure, and confound the reality and progress of disabled persons, they must be recognized and turned inside out. (2 and 6)

I pick up this task, and Yergeau’s task to “disable all the things” through asking these rhetorical questions and by questioning the tropes and norms of these performance structures. My work encourages the finding of paradoxes (Charlton), the engagement of “representational conundrums” (Sandahl), and questioning rather than defining (Kafer) for the growth of more discussion and complexity. Questions weave complexity into supposedly “simple” issues.

In the second chapter, I looked to the history of integrated dance companies and analyzed the value systems evident through the rhetoric, texts, and power structures embedded within them. Picking up on the tropes of unity and togetherness, and the commitment to ending stereotypes, I used Tobin Siebers's Ideology of Ability to conclude that although this model acknowledges the social construction of disability, the liberal inclusion approach ultimately depoliticizes and individualizes the disabled dancer.

Although I see many points of criticism of integrated dance, I understand the draw to it, and believe that there is a place for it in the landscape of dance and disability. I do, however, believe that the alternatives need be more available. In the next two chapters, I identified some of these alternatives.

In the third chapter, I show one of these alternatives that I call the "countercultural approach." Using *Sins Invalid* as my primary example, I argued that the politicization of *Sins Invalid* comes precisely from the way that they do not individualize disability, but rather see it as a social category, altering the normative power structures that we see in the inclusion model, and prioritizing disabled people in their mission and vision.

Examining those two chapters together, it seems that there is a stark contrast in the two forms, almost creating a binary in itself. If the inclusion model is a replication of mainstream culture, while the countercultural approach is a reactionary push against it, does the third option simply exist in between? The fourth chapter lays out a description for something that does *not* fit on either pole, nor in the middle, but creates a new dimension that frees itself from depoliticized inclusion, but is not in direct conversation with the mainstream. I call it a *crip aesthetic*, and in it I find a richness and dynamism that points us toward a *crip future*, claiming that *crip aesthetics* facilitate new power structures, intersectional content, and opportunity for coalition, and spatial

remodeling. Most importantly, I see this crip future of art as a space where we perceive the disabled body and mind as its own entity and source for creative material, and where artists can explore identity without adhering to hegemonic norms or directly responding to the systems that oppress us. Crip aesthetics forge a space *for us*.

I want to caution against perceiving this path as a linear one. As I laid out in Chapter 4, crip aesthetics have been surfacing for decades, despite the lack of such rhetorical categorization. I do not want to paint the spectrum from integrated dance through countercultural approaches to crip aesthetics as an evolutionary path. As groups like DanceAbility expand internationally and inclusion and diversity become a common part of the social experience, these inclusive forms will continue to exist. These forms will continue to exist because they are easy to fund, palatable to the mainstream, and involve all people. But it is a part of my agenda to leave space for crip representations to emerge and to create awareness and foster spaces, both ideological and physical, in which crip aesthetics thrive. There are artists who are already making this work happen. We do not have to wait—for societal values to change, for art world approval—to start creating it. The crip future is already here.

## 5.2 **Radical Spaces and Expansiveness**

In my own experiences, I found myself initially drawn to integrated dance. I did not yet have a disability identity, but also was comfortable in disability community and was in the process of locating myself within it. However, as I developed my disability identity, I realized that integrated dance codes me as a non-disabled dancer. I struggled with this and tried to find my place within all of it. I could not find space to explore my personal identity in a way that did not continue to put me into a narrative that coded me both as non-disabled and heterosexual.

Developing my own crip aesthetic has been a way for me to also explore my own impairments and queerness. It has given me space to ask questions without feeling like I am somehow derailing the form. It is part of my agenda to queer and crip and “disable all the things.” I do not expect everyone to come with me, but I do expect to open space.

Many people who end up in the “crip aesthetic” category of work began in the inclusion model. As I have stated before, these inclusion companies and classes are easier to find. They are also often less controversial. There is cross-pollination throughout these groups, however. For example, when I pursued a DanceAbility Teacher Certification in the summer of 2015, I brought with me a crip consciousness, and worked with my own experience of disability in doing the work. I noticed others dabbling in crip aesthetics as well. We “played by the rules” of DanceAbility, but also shared information and experiences, and sometimes books and articles. It was from them that I learned that we could find the radical spaces inside inclusion. I am well aware that radicalism-among-the-mainstream, even when it is underground, happens everywhere, and often goes unnoticed and undocumented. This is something that I take great comfort in knowing and being a part of.

### 5.3 **Where Do We Go From Here? The Vision**

Looking to both theorists who offer us ideas that expand the options of art and practitioners who have created crip aesthetics, I recognize the need to create more opportunities for disabled artists to find crip aesthetics in our own work, and start working to nurture these spaces where crip art is emerging. Relative to the other options, integrated dance is extremely common. Disabled artists, especially amateurs, need to see disabled people in leadership roles and on all fronts, creating strong work with an empowered consciousness about identity. Disability-only spaces, crip art organizing and production, accessible spatial arrangement, and

the centering of disabled artists in education are examples of crip aesthetic values for a generation to come.

I want to propose a form of crip art where disability does not have to be legible on the body, or in the choreography, but where the very embodied and em-mindedness of the performer, of the leadership, space, and collaboration, celebrates disabled identity. I envision ideological spaces that honor crip time, prioritize disabled voices, and refuse to prescribe a narrative or project sentimentality onto us. In this crip art world, *we* hold the power.

In this crip aesthetic vision, we crip the audience, the stage, the content, and the power structure. Crip aesthetics are about opening the space to reconceptualize success as something that does not rely on professionalism and mainstream renown, and where performing in elite spaces is not required to show off skill. Instead, we may ask ourselves the questions of what we might actually be giving up, or what meaning we might be creating, in performing in elite spaces. Is it worth it to perform if there is limited accessible seating, for example? Because of the wide range of performances, we cannot make prescriptive rules, but rather think outside the realm of what is common for mainstream artists. Crip art brings us to a place of asking questions because the form is in a state of becoming. We spend so much time defining it because it cannot be defined. It is important to perform in spaces where disabled people, as well as other marginalized groups, can be present in the audience and partake in the experience. In this vision, the goal is not ubiquitous relatability, but collaboration with other marginalized groups is paramount, as this creates opportunities to embrace the way that our intersectional identities make art expansive and complex. We do not have to pander to the mainstream or redefine normal; rather, we allow ourselves to question the mainstream, challenge the normative

foundations that the mainstream stands upon, and instead of creating our own norms, we dare to live, to create, and to produce without them.

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