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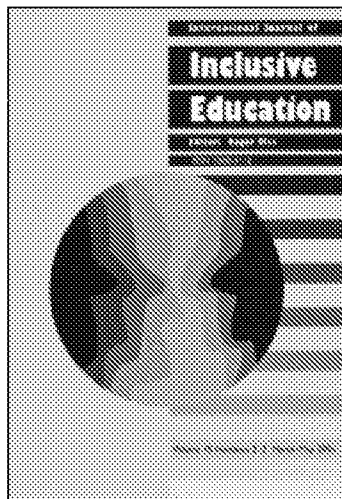
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Disability arts and culture as public pedagogy

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PRELUDE

Disability arts and culture as public pedagogy

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This article considers the implications of a disability arts, culture and scholarship series ‘The Unruly Salon’, undertaken at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver in Canada, which ran from January to March 2008. It asks how and whether the encounter of this Series with its diverse audiences makes a lasting contribution to the reshaping of education at the University of British Columbia in terms of curriculum, pedagogy, place, space and culture. It argues that The Unruly Salon Series is but a cornerstone in the groundwork for the ‘global citizenship’ to which the University’s Trek 2010 policy and mission statement aspire. The question is not only: what have the disabled and non-disabled participants of this timely and creative series learned from about working within the ‘fragile spaces between impairment and disability’?, but also the article asks: how will Canada’s third largest public university learn so as to transform its intellectual, social culture and built environment for prospective and existing students, faculty and staff with disabilities? The article concludes that such social change advantages the impaired and non-disabled alike.

Keywords: disability arts and culture; politics; policy; inclusion

A truth that’s deeper than the truth of dreams: the truth of the body. Bone truth. (Finger 1985)

Able-bodiedness is a temporary identity at best, while being human guarantees that all other identities will eventually come into contact with some form of disability identity. (Siebers 2008)

[S]tigmatized social positions founded upon gender, class, nationality, and race have often relied upon disability to visually underscore the devaluation of marginal communities. (Mitchell and Snyder 1997)

Emerging from an archival historical sociology of eugenics’ practices in British Columbia’s Woodlands’ School leaves one breathless, gasping for air; I craved live people and the creative well-springs from which humanity flows. While such research by itself would be an acceptable justification for artful activist scholarship, it was life experience that painted the brushstrokes for the artful blend of scholarship, activism, and community-making that would inspire some of the work for this issue inaugurated during a disability arts, culture and scholarship series at the University of British Columbia, aptly titled ‘The Unruly Salon’. Following a first-time devastating depression triggered in part by workplace stresses, I crafted my way back to work not

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so much by conscious design as by sheer will to thrive after months of near life-threatening lows. I persevered through stigma, negative comments and expectations that I should fail once again, my depression and medical leave having been read as the prior failure. It was not easy or automatic to identify with my new identity in the world of those with impairments in which ideologies of 'normalcy' rule. Art (good friends and a loving partner) in part saved my life both literally and metaphorically. I painted my way through the tail end of my depression (Roman 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2009d, 2009e) and when I was medically able to return to work, I took the paintings with me as comforting reminders of my will to persevere what I now understand as being the minefield and war-zone facing anyone who suffers an invisible impairment. Whereas standpoint epistemology is recognised and accepted for discussions of gender and racial inequality, it is still remains on the margins of acceptable scholarship when it comes to disability and particularly to disclosures of particular invisible impairments.

From 12 January to 29 March 2008, the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, British Columbia, a disability arts, culture and scholarship series changed and challenged who belonged at the university and within the wider body/mind politic of the community. The Unruly Salon has been an international and interdisciplinary disability arts, culture and scholarship Series (Colligo Tech 2008) I proposed that was well-funded by Green College at the University of British Columbia. The inspiration for The Unruly Salon came from thinking about how abstractions of the heady variety rarely move people or audiences into visceral and generative realms that inspire praxis. Disability arts and culture had already lodged firmly in the recesses of my memory and experience from the KickstART Festival in Vancouver. Education requires the commitment of hearts, minds and heads to make a committed difference. The Series had the feel of Parisian Salons, while brushing anti-colonial strokes on the Oxford–Cambridge-like setting of the residential Green College which generously funded the Series of intimate performances in its lush setting among old growth forest on the shores of Strait of Georgia.

The Unruly Salon created the intellectual space to ask dissident questions that would render ever so unstable and unnatural the notions of 'ability', 'fitness' and one-size-fits-all education that accompany medicalised colonialism and its persistence today. After all, the body/mind politic of disability rights and culture is global, compelling in its performances and far-reaching in its imagination and diverse across its inhabitants of unruly form, conscience and commitment. Springing forward into my consciousness from the recesses of collective memory that I had never thought previously to apply to my own life, I remembered the phrase, 'nothing about us without us', taken from James Charlton's *Nothing about us without us* (2000), which has become a mantra in the disability rights movement.

A Salon Series must be unruly if it is to challenge conventions of whose minds, bodies or voices belong in universities and civic life altogether, and what and whose knowledge matters in education. The pervasive and insidious ideologies of 'normalcy' and 'ability' profoundly confound and contradict claims to equalise the conditions of education or to disrupt the status quo. Indeed, these ideologies *are* the status quo. The acronym for The Unruly Salon, 'us', came from that title which spurred a diverse disability community, as well as interest from the non-disabled to participate in this international and interdisciplinary Series held at Green College at the University of British Columbia from 12 January to 29 March 2008. Uniquely combining internationally regarded disability studies scholars with professional

artists with impairments from a range of performing arts (e.g. musicians, painters, actors, dancers, poets), for a series of self- and collective disability representations.

The Series consisted of seven occasions for performances connecting minds, hearts and heads, intellects and emotions, calling upon audiences to go to work in the entertainment zone as they watched and engaged with professional artists and scholars with disabilities – from renowned comedian David Roche, who turns facial difference into soulful and biting reflection, to funk and pop singer and musician Chin, who rouses audiences internationally, integrating his experiences with polio into his music, from Lynn Manning's stunning acting of his solo play about being blinded in his twenties in a bar shooting in Los Angeles to Victoria Maxwell's stunning performances of her one-act play, *Crazy for Life*, dealing with her experience with bipolar disorder, among others. Artists and academics morphed on occasion, some even performed in both capacities (for example, distinguished Morse Professor, Alex Lubet who gave the scholarly paper included in this issue and played guitar with his life-partner, Iris Misae Shiraishi, Musician, Taiko Programs Director of Mu's Taiko drumming programme in Minnesota), reaching audiences in unexpected and moving ways (cf. http://www.unrulysalon.com/salon_series_2.html). As Roman and Frazee (2009a) put it, 'The inauguration invited the public to learn from and hear the voices of people with disabilities as distinguished artists, scholars and members of our community.'

The excitement in planning this inaugural moment was made all the more sweet because it was done in collaboration with local and international disability organisations. A consummate community organiser, Mr Geoff McMurchy joined me to become the Artistic Director of The Unruly Salon and brought with him his years of international experience as the Artistic Director for the Society for Disability Arts and Culture (now KickstART), having orchestrated and directed the first large-scale international festival in disability arts and culture in Canada called 'KickstART'. We worked together with numerous offices on the campus (e.g. Green College, Access and Diversity, The Equity Office, the President's Office, the Centre for Culture and Identity in Education, the Academic Provost's Office, The First Nations House of Learning, and the Faculty of Education, among others). A testament to the groundwork laid (of which major publicity played a part) was the palpable excitement over the willingness of University of British Columbia's President Toope to address the inaugural opening and the community-wide diverse audience of unruly bodies and minds. The stage was set and I admit with a certain thrill and nervousness that comes from a great anticipation and work, Geoff and I prepared offstage for the last-minute celebratory touches, the champagne, flowers for the stage, and the volunteer coordinator, Dawna Rumball, who had trained all volunteers, now worked with them as ushers to smooth accessibility and accommodation.

It was important to signal the importance of the land and territorial rights of the Musqueam First Nations people by honouring their unceded and traditional territories on which Green College resides through a processional, with invited First Nations singers, drummers who led all of us in the performance room. To set the stage, opening words were offered by Tom Patch, our Equity Associate Vice President, Ruth Warick from Access and Diversity, and Geoff McMurchy, among others. My introduction words were a coming to pride speech, noting that my entrée into to the disability community via first-hand personal experience was through a devastating depression which contrary to popular opinion was no slumber party. Yet, this was not just my

singular moment of ‘coming to pride’. It was an anthem for an entire disability rights, arts and cultural movement that nowhere on the campus found its reflection, or gathered as a community in living breathing intellectual and cultural flesh – possessing no centre in which to congregate or listen to academic speakers, no cultural meeting ground, other than as service recipients of the Disability Resource Centre, few courses at either at the graduate or undergraduate level to mingle with the heady and heart-spirited ideas of disability studies. The Unruly Salon said, ‘We are here! We deserve to be here!’ (McMurphy, Roman, and Frazee 2009; Roman et al. 2009; Roman and Frazee 2009a, 2009b). In that sense, to draw on a recognised anthem from the disability literature made the moment meet its match: I read a passage from novelist Jean Stewart’s *The body’s memory* (1989), well known for its frank call to the power of imagination, which traces the central character’s transformation from a gritty teacher who is thirty-something and who finds her life radically altered when surgery for a tumour in her hip lands unexpectedly in the position of becoming a wheel-chair user and who remains feisty. Her novel became one of the disability rights’ movement anthems, became my anthem – became a collective moment in the university’s history before an audience brimming over the allotted spaces and proudly animated. I stood before the audience and dove into the sea, not a single face to see but a heady swirl of emotion after months of feeling like an other in an other’s body/mind, resurfacing above the waves to a new body/mind politic with which to identify and claim proudly. Speaking with gusty self-possession and nervousness, I read with that third eye of awareness of oneself being watched by others and yet remaining centred in one’s own sure strokes. The title of my remarks echoed the last words of Kate, the central character of Stewart’s novel, as she watches herself swim in the ocean in her newly formed body, which reads as foreign to the non-disabled watching her:

Better swim now. It’s getting late, she’s due home in half an hour.

Getting in the water is usually easy, except at low tide. Crutching her way out to knee-level, Kate turns and hurls the crutches back onto dry land. By now, crusted over with minerals and rust, they look like detritus chipped from a sunken ship. At low tide, it’s trickier. Her arms aren’t strong enough to throw the sticks that far, once she’s walked out to a swimmable [*sic*] depth. This means she has to scramble on her hands and belly out to deeper water, legs dragging behind, having first disposed of the crutches at the limit of her hurling distance. For a long time this indignity was also her only way out of the water of swimming, until she began to ask for strangers’ help. Odd, they never volunteered in all her months of daily swimming. They simply stared non-plussed at her scabbing crawl to shore, as if witnessing a pre-historic sea-beast’s first journey out onto dry land.

Although Kate’s friend, Ellen had harangued Kate to avoid swimming, due to the undertow, sharks, jellyfish and lack of life-guards. ... Eventually, she gave up all attempts at domestication [of Kate]. It was Kate’s swimming story that defeated Ellen, a little set piece that quickly acquired the cachet of legend. Kate delivered it with giddy pride, honing the secret accent, timing, pause before denouement:

She was swimming out toward the open sea one day when she came upon a small fishing boat. In it sat a lone Greek who stared down, open-mouthed. He turned and peered in all directions looking for her boat, but his was the only one in sight. At last recovering speech, careful not to offend, he ventured, politely, his voice thickly Greek: ‘Are you ... drowning?’

Kate smiled up at him. ‘No. I’m swimming’, she said. (Stewart 1989, 275)

After my remarks, University of British Columbia's President Stephen J. Toope (2009) launched the Series, followed by a keynote given by the former Ontario Commissioner of Human Rights and current Ryerson University Professor of Distinction, Catherine Frazee, who beamed in cyber-style via teleconference to give a very moving and provocative keynote alongside an illustrious panel including film-maker Bonnie S. Klein, the director of the documentary *Shameless: the art of disability*, and Artistic Director and dancer Geoff McMurchy, who showed his video of his dance, *Wingspan three*. The feeling of inauguration was among the first signals that disability studies, scholars, learners and voices and people with disabilities deserved to be heard and were certainly claiming spaces in which to be heard. The opening papers are now being published (Toope 2009; Frazee 2008, 2009).

Like most universities, the University of British Columbia has a mission statement whose official discourse publicly declares its mission, goals, values and elements of a strategic plan. Other than the mention of commitment to access, equity, inclusion and diversity in general terms, people with impairments are not mentioned or addressed specifically as being among the most disadvantaged groups in terms of education, employment, healthcare, and at the post-secondary, all manner of equity and inclusion. Trek 2010's policy vision for the twenty-first century reads:

The University of British Columbia, aspiring to be one of the world's best universities, will prepare students to become exceptional global citizens, promote the values of a civil and sustainable society, and conduct outstanding research to serve the people of British Columbia, Canada, and the world.

The University of British Columbia will provide its students, faculty, and staff with the best possible resources and conditions for learning and research, and create a working environment dedicated to excellence, equity, and mutual respect. It will cooperate with government, business, industry, and the professions, as well as with other educational institutions and the general community, to discover, disseminate, and apply new knowledge, prepare its students for fulfilling careers, and improve the quality of life through leading-edge research.

The graduates of UBC will have developed strong analytical, problem-solving and critical thinking abilities; they will have excellent research and communication skills; they will be knowledgeable, flexible, and innovative. As responsible members of society, the graduates of UBC will value diversity, work with and for their communities, and be agents for positive change. They will acknowledge their obligations as global citizens, and strive to secure a sustainable and equitable future for all. (<http://www.trek2000.ubc.ca/principles/research.html>, accessed February 8, 2009)

Inclusion and equity are mighty tasks that require artful social imagination and the commitment of material resources. One without the other fails. Imagination begins with asking the question: Who is not here? Who cannot afford to be here; what more must be done to make buildings on the campus accessible, and well beyond that, to create social and intellectual spaces for people with impairments to be full citizens in the life of the University? Tension-filled moments do accompany asking such questions and they go to the heart of all anti-oppression pedagogies that place of disability as difference and equality of condition at the start of this journey of justice.

This was the first time at the University of British Columbia a cultural and scholarly space in which students, faculty, and the larger audiences of the disabled and the non-disabled could commune for three hours or so at a time, listen to and engage with impaired musicians, pianists, film-makers, comedians, mimes, and disability studies

scholars and so forth who claimed the stage as authorities and dream-weavers of possible futures together with the diverse working audiences over the course of seven Salons. As Canadian film-maker Bonnie S. Klein so aptly put it: 'I dream of creating a place where we can dare to be our most authentic, glorious, outrageous selves. It will be a brief vision of a possible future' (Klein 2008, <http://www.unrulysalon.com>, accessed September 2008). Each Salon had its own gestalt, audiences varied and simply put, were moved. Our possible future (as far as life at the university goes) was staged over three months and seven Unruly Salons, filling the air with the sense of possibility, of a disability presence that had awakened to challenge the idea of our invisibility or of not being heard.¹

Taking up the strategy of 'excavation' that Catherine Frazee, Distinguished Professor of Disability Studies and keynote for The Unruly Salon Series, recommended in her opening remarks (Frazee 2008, 2009), David Anderson, a visually impaired staff and student, offered these remarks as after-word at the last Salon:

Like other universities in North America, The University of British Columbia has not always been a warm or even tepid environment for disabled students. History tells us that it took several court battles, lost by UBC in fantastic ways, before the University realized that it not only *had* to support and accommodate students with disabilities, but that it *should*.

In my own experience as a visually impaired student at the University of British Columbia, meeting other students with disabilities over the last six years has been incidental, accidental, and random. Not being able to see meant that I didn't meet many other blind people unless I literally ran into them. Most of the blind and other disabled people I do know on campus were previous friends and contacts from organizations outside the university (e.g. the CNIB etc.).

As is the case, I imagine, at many universities, my university does indeed provide services and accommodations to students with disabilities, support, as it were, to individuals, but it does not overextend itself at all to support communities, advocate or truly promote active engagement or participation of disabled people on all levels. UBC does not provide the infrastructure or environment necessary to encourage the interaction and networking of students with disabilities aside from the odd, start of the year mixer. My fellow disabled students have been cast as passive receivers of services, not active agents of change. There is no *US* in UBC. The emergence of the Salon this term and the resultant arrival of artists, academics, community members, politicians, and radicals have created, for the first time, a refreshing sense of a real disability community at UBC. During the three months of the Salon Series, I have felt like an active agent of dialogue, inquiry, and engagement with a large, unruly and dynamic community that has not often come together on campus in such a powerful and all-inclusive manner. (Anderson 2009, 38)

Eloquent and powerful, Anderson asked the question that was the 'elephant in the room' as to whether the aftermath of the Series should be read as a celebration, eulogy or a coming to pride in disability scholarship or community. The 'weaving' (after Frazee's expression; Frazee 2008, 2009) he did with the struggles of queer (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered) pride on the campus shed light on how disability pride might be taken up by students, activists and scholars on the campus to advocate for a home for intellectual, social and cultural work that exceeds the frameworks of individual recipients of disability services and becomes instead a place of active intellectual pursuit and learning in community:

[A] Disability Studies department is what we need at UBC. Student groups alone have not remained. 'Student Services' supports individuals, not communities. We need an

enduring space on campus in which to share, question and learn together and to challenge the current social hegemonies that disallow our active participation and involvement in laying claim to who we are and how we are represented.

Coming to Pride

Speaking of queers, something else we share with this group is the 'coming to pride' that Dr. Frazee outlined to us so few months ago. '[C]oming to pride,' she explained to us, 'is a delicate alchemy that can only take root in the fertile ground of community. It is our connection to each other that transforms stigma to grace, personal burden to collective struggle, shame to honour' (Frazee 2009, 7-9). I believe in these Salons we have come to pride, but how will we continue to do so without an established and flourishing community that goes beyond passive receivers of service?

So what have the Salons achieved? They have reminded me of the power of community, and in that community, the Salons have created an opportunity for active and creative engagement with ideas and people. They have reminded me of my own power and creativity, and that I am indeed part of something greater than my own personal struggles, achievements and flailing in the dark.

And in that revelation of finding me implicated in a greater community, I am reminded of the responsibilities of students to ask questions and challenge! Radical bodies do not negotiate bureaucratic spaces well, literally or symbolically, and it seems strange to operate on the limited level of bureaucratic administration and not as an engaged community or at least a critical and unruly receiver. We require spaces like the Salons to thrive and to create community on all levels: academically, personally, creatively, and socially. The magic created by events such as the Salons affords us a glimpse of the possible. Unfortunately, if the Salons are temporary, then, my remarks become a eulogy as they as much as they are an acknowledgement and a celebration. The creation of a permanent community requires considerable time, effort, and institutional support – and the support and active involvement of disabled students, as well as faculty and staff.

In this last Salon of the Series, Mr Stefan Honisch drew our attention through music to the 'fragile spaces between impairment and disability', and I would argue that these very Salons themselves are 'fragile spaces' – ones we should cherish for their suspension of labels and constraints and their rampant ambiguity, and recognizing their value and infrequent occurrence, work to produce more of them.

The Salons remind us to take pride in the achievements of the past and the work of the Series today, and to make a commitment to the ongoing work that lies ahead. (Anderson 2009, 38)

This issue addresses the questions of the performance of teaching and learning with disabilities in a variety of formal educational and non-formal contexts (including mothering), challenging the terms of education to conceptualise difference without reinstating ability as ablest meritocratic ideology and to think in radical democratic terms what inclusion and inclusive education means, how labels get instantiated in the mind-numbing policies and practices of education's accountability and accounting rituals, as part of both the political and symbolic economy. To claim identities that transform in counter-hegemonic ways whose knowledge counts and matters is to speak back in deft and artful ways to the notions of exclusion and forms of status quo 'inclusion' that are token. Here, the discourses of the arts, cultural politics and human rights need to be put into dialog with one another in order to make social transformation. To that end, the structure and organisational logic of this issue is to create the

weaving necessary between and among disability arts and culture and disability rights' discourses. Too often they remain discrete – a world apart from one another.

We begin and end our issue with disability arts, drawing on the arrestingly evocative poetry of Lynn Manning. A creative fusion of narratives, textual analysis and theoretical argumentation allows authors Roman, Berland, Lubet, and Campbell to discuss new ways of imagining disability on various pedagogical stages of education – whether from the place of media campaigns designed to educate the public about invisible impairments (Roman) or in the university classroom (see, for example, Berland, Kumari Campbell, and Lubet). We are mindful in the latter part that rights-based struggles are an art, and would benefit from the insights of learning from the arts and from artists who must always consider their audiences as working audiences rather than as passive recipients and consumers of knowledge. Steven Kahn's tenacious poem about the exclusions of schooling set the stage for the second part of this issue which weaves in discussions of rights-based work as underlying a range of experiences of people with disabilities, from the familial stage of disabled mothers' experiences of mothering and homecare work as surveillance to the active self-creation in the participatory theatre of psychiatric survivors at the Workman Theatre in Toronto, Canada, from the exploration of the reception of physically impaired musicians by their audiences to the accommodations necessary to assist in disability becoming read as part of rather than a distraction from Western classical music performed by a physically impaired musician. We provisionally close our issue with Lynn Manning's poem, 'The magic wand', a postlude to commemorate disability as difference, identity and pride.

I am tempted to say that the unruly voices and texts in the issue speak for themselves and thus will not be further introduced by way of sum here. Yet, this is not entirely the case. Texts and words on pages come alive when audiences take them up.

With no further ado, I raise my glass in cheer and toast our Salon contributors and audience co-creators – you the readers. I toast with modest introductory words to put flesh on unruly mind–body politics, to regale in support of these 'fragile spaces' and texts that tell us we are here. This issue (I refuse to use the word, 'special' as the modifier) is one of three polished jewels coming from or inspired by the performance and scholarly gems of The Unruly Salon. For an inter-textual reading delight, I encourage our readers to consult as well the other issues in appearing in the *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* and the *Review of Disability Studies: An International Journal*. Each journal is to be commended for taking risks with us. None are isolated or token efforts. The Series, the journal issues, the documentary film (Buchan, Roman and McMurchy 2008) and The Unruly Salon website (Collegio Tech 2008) are the intertextual intersections and contexts through which we constituted engaged publics (e.g. from the cross-disability movement, the academy, disabled students, the non-disabled, teachers, prospective teachers, scholars, artists, and policy-makers). To embody the political challenges ahead means to take up the issues and calls raised here. Thus, in the spirit of our Unruly Salon as Disability Theory and Praxis, we toast you, our co-creators and invite you join with us in the tasting and savoring of this full and rich palate and the rich media produced to represent The Unruly Salon.

Note

1. For the relationship between reading disability arts as a way of doing and speaking back to status quo education and token versions of inclusive education, see, for example, Ware (2008).

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