

Inclinations

Dancing Ramps, Disability, and Multiplicities through Research-Creation

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Article abstract

Inclinations is an audio-described, 7-minute, site-specific, disability dance on film followed by a video discussion between three of the disabled artist-researchers. Throughout this project, we embraced a research-creation methodology to engage with the research question: How can we fully embed intersectional disability justice, not only as a theoretical lens, but also, as a methodological imperative? This work centres the concepts of disability culture and disability generativity, and purposefully diverges from more popular traditions of physically-integrated dance in favour of disability dance. We demonstrate and discuss how this choice—alongside various filmic practices—seeks to decentre the ableist gaze, normalizing narratives, and the ubiquitous non-disabled referent. Other methodological considerations enacted and discussed in this work include centring access aesthetics, consent, care, disability justice principles, and questions of power in every aspect of the creation process.

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INCLINATIONS: DANCING RAMPS, DISABILITY, AND MULTIPLICITIES THROUGH RESEARCH-CREATION

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Abstract: Inclinations is an audio-described, 7-minute, site-specific, disability dance on film followed by a video discussion between three of the disabled artist-researchers. Throughout this project, we embraced a research-creation methodology to engage with the research question: How can we fully embed intersectional disability justice, not only as a theoretical lens, but also, as a methodological imperative? This work centres the concepts of disability culture and disability generativity, and purposefully diverges from more popular traditions of physically-integrated dance in favour of disability dance. We demonstrate and discuss how this choice—alongside various filmic practices—seeks to decentre the ableist gaze, normalizing narratives, and the ubiquitous non-disabled referent. Other methodological considerations enacted and discussed in this work include centring access aesthetics, consent, care, disability justice principles, and questions of power in every aspect of the creation process.

Keywords: disability justice; critical disability studies; intersectionality; research-creation; dance; video

Inclinations is an audio-described, 7-minute, site-specific, disability dance on film followed by a video discussion between three of the disabled artist-researchers. Throughout this project, we embraced a research-creation methodology, that is, “a form of directed exploration through creative processes that includes experimentation, but also analysis, critique, and a profound engagement with theory and questions of method” (Chapman & Sawchuk, 2012, p. 19). A key research question was methodological: How can we fully embed intersectional disability justice (Berne, 2015), not only as a theoretical lens, but also, as a methodological imperative?

This work centres the concepts of disability culture and disability generativity (see Clare, 2017; Fritsch, 2013; Sheppard, 2019), including the notion that disability communities have collectively generated valuable, complex, and internally-divergent knowledges, aesthetics, and practices that are not reducible to our physiological differences, our demands for inclusion, nor our legibility within nondisabled cultures. For related reasons, this work purposefully diverges from more popular traditions of physically-integrated dance—dance that pairs (most often) wheelchair users with (often normatively-trained) non-disabled dancers—in favour of disability dance. We demonstrate and discuss how this choice—alongside various filmic practices, such as chair-height camera angles—seeks to decentre the ableist gaze, normalizing narratives, and the ubiquitous non-disabled referent.

Other methodological considerations enacted and discussed in this work include centring access aesthetics, that is, ensuring the same theoretical and aesthetic care is taken in producing the multiple modalities for experiencing the work (e.g., through audio description; Kleege, 2016). It also included centring access, consent, care, and disability justice principles in every aspect of the creation process. Importantly, the engagement with such principles does not enable us to skirt questions of power. Indeed, both the dance and discussion engage with the eugenic and racist power relations that infuse our communities, connections, and creations.

Video Link: <https://vimeo.com/675026032>

Transcript of After-Film Discussion

Onscreen is the poster for the movie Inclinations. In the foreground is half of a wheel. Chasing behind it is Alice Shepherd, a Black disabled dancer leaning forward past the front casters of her wheelchair, diving down a ramp, her arms stretched out behind her, her gaze intense.

*In the next 7 minutes, you'll experience an accessible, visually described version of *Inclinations*. After, we will take 15 minutes to unpack some of the motivations, themes, and processes of the work, including this aesthetic approach to film description.*

[Inclinations Video Plays with Audio Description]

Danielle Peers: My name is Danielle Peers, one of the creative leads and also one of the dancers in *Inclinations*. Lindsay and I are sitting in the same room on a brown couch, and I am wearing a bright blue polka-dot shirt. I've got short, cropped hair and I'm non-binary and go by they/them.

Lindsay Eales: I'm Lindsay Eales. I am a queer fat mad femme. I have long, red curly hair. I'm wearing a beautiful art scarf. I'm wearing a green dress. I got a round face, pale skin, and very sparkly cat-eye glasses.

Alice Sheppard: I am Alice Sheppard. I will describe myself as a light-skinned Black woman in which I take accountability for the politics of colourism, but do not in this moment assert either passing or colourist privilege. It is merely to make available to Blind and non-visual viewers information that sighted viewers have. So, I'm a Black, capital B, light-skinned Black woman. I'm also multi-racial, I have quarantine, curly hair with brown, gray, and the remainders of blonde stripes in it. And I'm wearing a grey sweater.

DP: What made us want to make *Inclinations*? What sparked it?

AS: I think it was your origination and your invitation in the end that brought us together, like a longstanding desire to work together.

LE: You came to Edmonton to give a talk at the U of A, and you and Danielle get on this ramp with this beautiful railing that ended up being the site. You start rolling and flipping and playing, and almost end up late for the actual talk because you were both so into the movement and the creative potential.

Cellphone footage of Alice and Danielle spinning in circles together down the ramp. Alice somersaults upside down on the ramp's railing and hangs off lap, hands out to the side.

DP: So, this is shot at the University of Alberta. Where we are, Edmonton in Treaty Six territory, is in the middle of Alberta, an hour and a half away from the Michener Centre which was where over 90% of the people who were sterilized in Canada during the eugenic era were done, in Red Deer, and the people who run the sterilization committee, who decided who was going to be sterilized and so on were almost all professors from the University of Alberta.

And we live in a province where that is still very near to the surface in terms of the way that COVID is being handled. And the kind of idea about which lives are worth valuing, and worth making changes over. And so that's very alive for me in the making of this film.

Danielle coaches John in using the ramp's gravity to spin his wheelchair.

AS: Why didn't we want to make physically integrated dance? Why didn't we want to make inclusive dance? Because once there are non-disabled, normate bodies and minds on stage, they become interpretive and anchor reference points. And the frame of the field thus far is that the inclusive dance models overweigh access to disability culture. And I wanted to make work that was rooted in disability culture, which is very separate from these kind of inclusive arguments or demonstrating that a disabled dancer can dance.

Even if the creative practice is non-hierarchical, there's still power at play. And there's certainly, certainly, certainly interpretive practice by the non-disabled gaze and the non-disabled audience members.

DP: Despite, I think, the three chair users clearly having, I think, very different embodiments and different relationships to training and dance, there was such a pleasure in being able to share movement vocabularies and create movement vocabularies that we would all take on without always having the emphasis on translation always sort of being on us.

Video of Daniella and John again.

AS: That's what I mean about power. There's an overwhelming pressure to normalize. And some of it's unwitting and some of it's ignorant, but there's power at play and no one is unaware of that power.

Alice pushes uphill against three white dancers.

AS: Even within our process for making *Inclinations*, there was still a tremendous amount of power going on. It just got distributed differently, analyzed differently, and moved through differently. And it's those dynamics of power within disability culture I still want to be able to think about. I mean, we made a film with four wheelchair users, which repeats again the priority of a wheelchair user in the public eye as a symbol of disability and disability culture.

Alice pushes again.

AS: We made a film that tackled the politics of race, but really the racial dynamic of that was not equitably distributed or even racially cultured. We moved within white disability culture in order to make a film that somehow said something about race.

Three white dancers push Alice backwards down the ramp.

AS: There was a ton of power going on, it was just that those dynamics were differently contoured and differently leveraged and differently felt.

Dancers try out moves while discussing and laughing.

DP: How can one do work like this from as much of a disability justice kind of perspective as possible while trying to make sort of high-quality art that has some sort of political and intellectual and academic value?

AS: The stake here is to recognize that to the mainstream non-disabled world, that actually there is something to research. That disability, which is thought to be only tied to the personal experience of impairment or the argument for inclusion or the argument to justice or political change, that actually there's more to disability culture and some of that more is tied to academic research and that disability culture itself is research worthy.

Three white dancers grab Alice's chair as she leans back towards the camera.

DP: To me *Inclinations* is both an artistic piece and a research piece, and a deeply embodied research piece. And also, a deeply embedded research piece within all of our experiences and practices of disability culture. But recognizing, I think particularly, I think in, in the history of like disability culture, how many pivotal theorists have been

artists and who have theorized and supported academic research around critical disability through art.

Dancers and crew watch video captured by wheelchair height camera.

DP: One of the things that I remember spending a lot of time on was really thinking about how much film about disability dance was done from non-disabled gaze and non-wheeled gaze.

AS: Shooting wheel movement is really complicated and that hasn't been shot well. We don't want the camera to be this kind of flat thing. Most recent research really is about combining the race and disability in the camera angle. So, for example, in the same way that there's the focus on the wheelchair and the disarticulation of the body when shooting Black folk, there's the "we shall overcome" portrait of triumph and dignity and suffering and all of that shit.

So, ugh! We need to be able to break this open, to think through intersectionality in camera strategy. We don't have that yet. And we also don't have a really clear way to shoot wheeled movement.

Lindsay helps Danielle up.

DP: We'd chosen to hire a process doula, which was Lindsay's job description.

LS: I wanted to cultivate a sense of care, a space that recognized that we might be together in pain and being together in pain is like deeply pleasurable often in Crip culture. We do things like make sure that there's heating pads, and if folks need wound care or, there was some first aid stuff that really needed to be attended to with a really excellent wipe out at one point, and having the space and the intentionality to support the holding of space in that way was a really beautiful opportunity to imagine what was possible if we made space for and centred this kind of way of co-being and co-relating.

DP: Lindsay had veto. Lindsay stopped shots. Like that's not usually what a production assistant did. Like really actually literally placed at the centre. We built our schedules around what the articulated needs were and like the choice that we build around actually people's bodies and hearts and souls and minds. Half of this film was made with us lying flat.

Danielle lies down, crew check their phones while Alice rehearses somersault over bar.

DP: We'd meet like at your hotel room, and we'd all be lying down on the floor to rest our bodies talking about what happened the day before and planning, and then we'd go and we'd shoot, and sorry, choreograph and shoot all at the same time.

Dancers lean back over the railing, laughing.

AS: Maybe we should just summarize why this description is different. And this is multivocal description. The description is not a displaced encounter. It's not a description of the work, but moves towards becoming an aesthetic experience in itself so that anyone who is Blind or non-visual or is just using this description is not getting one person's perspective on the work, but is in fact getting a crafted experience that in some ways is the work. So, we really wanted to dig in and see what could happen.

We ended up with quite a team for this, right? I mean, that's the other thing to say is that, this description was a team work to handle the queerness, handle the race, handle the questions of gender in the work. It couldn't be done in traditional, what Georgina Kleege calls, "voice of god mode."

Dancers try moves on the railing as they discuss.

DP: So, I think one of the early things we talked about when we pitched the film was talking about what can be generated when we can actually collect together and create together in that space, and thinking about that idea of disability, generativity, and disability culture in terms of our collectivity.

AS: We agreed so much, but we also disagreed so much about the way these words, disability culture, disability generativity, disability community, all got used in the context of art-making. And our different academic practices, I think I found that really fascinating because of course the same words, different meaning. Those to me are the point of generativity that, that we can be in this space of such deep and fundamental disagreement, and that is I think representative of disability.

So, I'm not even at this moment sure that when we're saying disability justice we're even meaning the same set of things or even generativity we're meaning the same set of things. Although so far the conversation has rolled on quite nicely.

DP: I think sometimes we have this thing because there's so...we've had such histories of scarcity that we like got to celebrate anything that comes out of, you know, out of

disability, out of disabled people that are art-making, and some of it is incredibly violent and some of it is aesthetically very uninteresting. And yeah, I think that idea that we can, that there can be enough different, like you say, well, resources, spaces to have argument and tension, and affinity, that I think that is what I would hope for disability art.

AS: Which, okay, so going to get controversial, which involves us speaking to each other as disabled artists and not constantly trying to justify disability and explain it to the outside world. But again, funding structures, cultural structures, access to community. To be able to get the kinds of learnings and tools and conversations to be part of them, to find artistic practice within them versus within a non-disabled framework, where the disability can only be about identity or the medical, the biomedical, or we must fight for social justice. These are the only things that are allowed within those worlds, whereas within our worlds, the conversation is a lot more complicated.

DP: Yeah, I definitely long for complex stories and complex storytelling.

AS: The marvellous thing about Inclinations was that we did have those conversations and we did have those disagreements and we did have deeply rooted and resourced arguments about that. And I think that itself is the manifestation of generativity.

DP: That's so beautiful.

AS: No, it was like, this is how I was. It's like, eh!

[Credits]

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