

“The Art of Care: *AugurCon 2020* and Disability Justice”

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Disabled creative community is a place where the power and potential of mutual care can shine. This space offers a unique opportunity to explore what care can be outside of the historically fraught confines of either the traditional intimacy and gendered context of family or the economic exchange of the neoliberal model of care. *AugurCon 2020*, a speculative literary event organized by a team that both included and prioritized disabled perspectives, offers a personally impactful example of the processes of accessibility and care in artistic community. Inspired and guided by the work of Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, particularly *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* (2018), I believe in the power of sharing stories of collective access and care. This paper seeks to honour the care-ful artfulness of disabled artistic community by examining the organizational choices and structure of *AugurCon 2020* through the lens of work on mutual care and interdependence.

Personal Context & Positionality

Throughout this paper I intentionally speak in the first person and make explicit my relationship to the subjects I discuss, a practice that is informed by feminist, queer, and decolonial studies and by my Anishinaabe heritage and Indigenous modes of knowledge production (Davis & Khonach, 2020; Ferguson, 2013; Simandan, 2019; Simpson, 2000; Wilson, 2008). I was raised by a disabled mother and surrounded by disabled and queer aunties. I grew up simultaneously within crip culture with interdependence and mutual caregiving as a communal norm, within the larger ableist and individualistic norms of Canadian society, and within the painful contradictions of my disabled mother's own internalized ableism. As a young person I easily embraced some of my disabilities and wrestled with accepting others, particularly in relationship to my identity as a caregiver and recognizing my own limits and needs. I am hard of hearing and wear hearing aids in order to participate in the hearing world.

I am neurodivergent. I have a connective tissue disorder that involves chronic pain and fatigue. My academic process is inherently altered and informed by these lived realities; my methodology is crippled by my being (Pierre & Peers, 2016).

In addition to crip culture, my Mama also grounded her parenting in Anishinaabe epistemology that she learned from her maternal grandmother, one of the only safe adults in her own childhood. In particular, she taught me that each of us can only truly speak to our own experience and that, simultaneously, we and whatever knowledge we can share are always in relationship. No truth is universal. Nindebwe. I speak *my* truth. There is no *the* truth. The work of Indigenous scholars has confirmed and clarified my understanding of these principles (Anderson & Lawrence, 2012; Cochran et al., 2008; Shilling, 2020; Wilson, 2008).

Historical Context

Both the concept and lived experience of care are a site of conflicting perspectives and research, including and especially between feminist and disability scholars. Feminist theories have focused on the gendered inequalities and exploitation of care workers, emphasizing how much care work is rendered invisible and performed by unpaid women in relational roles (Watson et al., 2004). Caregiving is all too often used euphemistically to describe under-funded, under-valued, feminized, racialized labour that exploits and harms those who provide it and those who receive it (Eales & Peers, 2020).

Disability studies have focused on the marginalization and confinement of those receiving “care” and have primarily advanced an instrumentalist understanding of care as a solution, recentering disabled people not as passive recipients of care but as employers (Watson et al., 2004). Care becomes a non-emotional and utilitarian business arrangement that protects the disabled employer from the infantilization, powerlessness, and abuse that has historically

been intertwined with “care.” However, this construction of care also ignores the complexity of interpersonal dynamics and emotional work within caring relationships (Watson et al., 2004). These deficiencies have left the necessary critiques of care made by disability advocacy vulnerable to being co-opted by a neoliberal agenda that idealizes independence and diminishes the value both of disabled people and of the labour of those who support and care for disabled people (McLaughlin, 2020).

Normative narratives of care typically involve either heavily gendered and nuclear family-based models or neoliberal economic exchange, both of which have roots in oppressive and exploitative paradigms. Neither of these narratives accurately represent the complexity and possibility of care relationships. Both feminist studies and disability studies have frequently failed to acknowledge or work with the lived fluidity of who cares for whom and when and how. Both disabled people and caregivers - and the many people who are both - have had their lives “colonized by naturalistic assumptions” (Watson et al., 2004, p. 338). Women’s caring work has been devalued and erased by being positioned as natural to their gender, while coercion and control of disabled people is justified as natural to their disabled bodyminds (Watson et al., 2004). The normative dichotomy of carer or cared-for creates a division between groups who overlap and intersect and share common cause.

Interdependence & The Fusion of Feminist and Disability Perspectives on Care

In reality, interdependency - however imperfect - is inherent in care relationships. Even within support relationships that are constrained by neoliberal welfare/economic models and fraught with complex and oppressive power relations, Palmer and Scott (2018) have found that reciprocal interdependency, in varying degrees and forms, is common and even inevitable. While hired careworkers provide both physical and emotional labour to their clients, disabled

clients/employers perform a complex mix of presentational emotion management and assertiveness to navigate the power relations of the care relationship, negotiate autonomy and control, and create the kind of care relationships that meet their needs (Palmer and Scott, 2018). Palmer and Scott describe the relational emotion work that disabled employers of caregivers do as “the sustaining of dignity in the context of intense intimacy” and in combination with the emotion work of support workers, it creates varying degrees of reciprocal interdependency (2018, p. 67).

Within the familial context, building on prior research on the impact of life partners’ behavior, choices, and personal attributes on morbidity and mortality, Antonelli, Grace, and Boltz (2020) interviewed aging couples and found that normative unidirectional concepts of caregiving do not reflect the lived experiences of couples giving and receiving care. Mutual caregiving was the norm in the couples they interviewed, and caregiving enriched both individuals’ lives (Antonelli, et al., 2020). Caring as a lived experience is typically bidirectional - flowing both to and from the individuals in caring relationship with each other - and rooted in relational dynamics within the couple (Antonelli, et al., 2020).

If mutual care is an inevitable part of human relationships, how can we create care that does not compromise the physical, mental, and emotional safety of receivers and givers of care? On a theoretical level, McLaughlin draws from a feminist ethics of care that considers care an “important social practice embedded in our interdependencies with each other” (2020, p. 398). From this, McLaughlin (2020) argues that it is possible to bring together disability advocacy’s resistance to care and feminist care ethic’s celebration of care to create a framework that connects interdependency, independence, care, and support. This framework challenges “the current neoliberal supremacy of individualism and austerity” (McLaughlin, 2020, p. 410).

From an intimate perspective, McArthur, a disabled adult, describes her family's nonnormative reimagining of independence and dependence with family-based care as parts of a "complementary shape-shifting whole" that she envisions like a Slinky (McArthur, 2012, p. 166). In this metaphor, the balance between independence and dependence does not require equivalence or neutrality, but instead emerges from constant recalibration. McArthur (2021) seeks support that does not compromise her own or her caregivers' physical, mental, and emotional safety, and together she and her family collaboratively coordinate their needs. Further, she describes her own care as a continual process of learning and communication; she is able to articulate her lived experience and needs, and she works in loving relationship with people who are able to honor and receive this knowledge (McArthur, 2012).

Like many self-identified crips, Eales and Peers reject abusive and exploitative care but refuse to reject care "as a concept and a praxis" (Eales & Peers, 2020, p. 164). They affirm that the care work of other disabled, Mad, neurodivergent, and sick queers has been essential to their survival and the joy and purpose they experience (Eales & Peers, 2020). Despite the extent to which capitalist systems have exploited care to justify and reproduce precarity, Eales and Peers (2020) believe that care can also resist precarity, or at least keep us alive so we can resist it together. Eales and Peers (2020) describe the power of care, in their case primarily in the context of community and chosen family, in similar language to that used by McArthur (2021). In this understanding of care, as performed by and for disabled people, it is a continuously recalibrated dance of intimacy and humility and remaking the world together (Eales & Peers, 2020). Eales and Peers (2020) assert that crippling care is both disrupting normative relationships to create consensual access intimacy and challenging the violent systems that devalue both disabled lives and carework to create broader change. Care can be a consensual, joyful practice that both

supports our political efforts and is, itself, political.

Bridging theory and experience, Kelly (2013) understands, from personal experience as a friend-tendant - an informal caregiver to a friend - that support interactions are intersectional and both viscerally embodied and embedded within social narratives of bodies, gender, race, class, sexuality, and ability. Kelly (2013) witnesses the skill and effort her friend puts into negotiating these multi-layered power dynamics and learns from the dialogue that inevitably occurs between them as they work to create a healthy care relationship. Exploring the parallels between the paradoxes of accessibility and the paradoxes of care, Kelly proposes that accessible care is “an unstable tension among emotions, actions, and values, simultaneously pulled toward both empowerment and coercion” (Kelly, 2013, p. 790). Both accessibility and care are active processes, not a static achievement.

Artful Caring

Within disabled artistic community, care as an active process is a model that has been successfully deployed. One notable example, Tangled Art + Disability’s “Crippling the Arts” symposium, is discussed by Chandler, Aubrecht, Ignagni, and Rice (2021). “Crippling the Arts” revolved around cross-cultural conversations about the history of disability arts in Canada; the relationship among arts, accessibility, and aesthetics; and the relationships between disability arts and disability justice. Chandler, et al., (2021) and the other organizers centred disabled, Deaf, and Mad people, including themselves, and prioritized accessibility, disrupting normative ideas of scheduling, space, and possibilities for participating. The concluding discussion of the symposium focused on how to cultivate disability arts in ways that not only are accessible to crip, Mad, and Deaf artists but that challenge normative cultural practices and honour crip, Mad, and Deaf cultural practices. In this discussion, they asserted that organizers must ask themselves

a myriad of specific questions - ranging from how to create schedules that follow crip time, to how to not only provide ASL translation services but ensure that it is also culturally reflective of the audience (Chandler et al., 2021). However, organizers must also ask themselves broad questions of how to balance conflicting access needs and how to challenge ableist norms both within the arts and the broader culture (Chandler et al., 2021).

AugurCon 2020 wrestled with these questions and practices in a multitude of ways. Since 2017, Augur Magazine Literary Society has worked with a vision of bringing together literary and genre fiction and making room for “authors, characters and themes generally underrepresented in the speculative fiction scene” (Killjoy, 2021, para. 1). Within an eight-hour day of panels, workshops, and learning opportunities, *AugurCon 2020* explored “what it means to research and craft speculative worlds that are inherently informed by our own” and “to interrogate the opportunities and dangers of leveraging metaphor and analogy in fiction” (Augur Magazine Literary Society, 2020, para. 2). The implicit disability perspective within these questions was made explicit by a number of panelists and embedded deeply within the design of *AugurCon 2020*. Publisher and CEO of *Augur Magazine* and Co-Director of *AugurCon 2020* Kerry C. Bryne was guided by the question of how to “create an environment that is responsible and collaborative and has care at the core of it?” (Beattie, 2020, para. 7). Co-Editor in Chief of *Augur Magazine* and Co-Director of *AugurCon 2020* Terese Mason Pierre describes both *Augur Magazine* and *AugurCon 2020* as “working toward building a community that starts with the core assumptions that people of colour and marginalized people are valuable and their stories are valuable” (Beattie, 2020, para. 12)

A robust code of conduct for *AugurCon 2020*, see Appendix A, was developed with the input and review of many volunteers, including myself. This code of conduct explicitly centred

consent and the understanding that freedom of speech and freedom of artistic expression “does not acquit one from the consequences of such speech, especially if... disruptive, counterproductive, or harmful” (Augur Magazine Literary Society, 2020).

Accessibility formed an integral part of *AugurCon 2020*'s code of conduct. Participants were asked to refrain from the use of gifs, especially those involving flashing or strobing lights to avoid triggering migraines or seizures and to improve the experience of those using screen readers. Participants were also asked to use content warnings and instructed how to use Discord spoiler tags to make it possible for other participants to choose whether or not to view potentially triggering material. This emphasis on consent continued with participants being asked to avoid private messaging other participants without asking in a public channel first. Organizers also provided a guide to assist those who were new to Discord. Community members were encouraged to share any concerns or questions and were offered multiple ways to contact organizers and moderators. To ensure respectful and consensual interactions throughout *AugurCon 2020*, a team of volunteer moderators, including myself, stayed present in conversations, working in shifts and focusing on specific channels, endeavoring to respond promptly and effectively to any issues. Together, all of these strategies worked to, in the words of s.e. smith, “anticipate and intentionally engage inequities, exclusions, and feelings of unwelcome” as is necessary to create a crip space (Chandler et al., 2021, p. 177).

AugurCon 2020 also worked from a place of valuing diversity of knowledge - organizers “tried to find a mix of people with different experiences” (Beattie, 2020). They, like the organizers of Tangled, prized “physical and mental difference as a significant value in itself” (Chandler, 2017, p. 58). A space is created for difference to be reclaimed from the oppressive view of white supremacist heteropatriarchal capitalism and celebrated (Clare, 2001). Out of

twenty-five panelists, moderators, and facilitators, almost half publicly identified as disabled, neurodivergent, and/or Mad; the vast majority of panelists were people of colour and many were queer and/or trans-identified (Augur Magazine Literary Society, 2020). These voices were consciously prioritized by *AugurCon 2020* and recognized for their ability to provide unique and valuable knowledge.

Throughout the design of *AugurCon 2020* many practices also represented a cripistimological approach aligned with Douglas, Rice, and Kelly's (2017) vision of a pedagogy of care. Cripistemologies not only centre disabled knowledge, they challenge the notion that ability/disability is fully knowable. In fact, Johnson and McRuer (2014) suggest orienting to disability through a sense of not-knowing to counter the ableist notions of external expertise. In explicitly striving to ensure access to all without disclosure and ensuring space for participants to ask for what they needed, *AugurCon 2020* honoured the unknowableness of each other's needs and avoided making assumptions. *AugurCon 2020* actively worked to avoid the kind of totalizing solutions that "erase differences within and among disability communities" by keeping access possibilities broad and open and engaging with participants throughout in the form of check-ins (Chandler et al., 2021, p. 177)

Within my own life, giving care and being cared for has always involved reciprocal knowledge exchange and knowledge creation. Douglas, Rice, and Kelly (2017) provide language for this experience, asserting that teaching and learning inherently occur through care exchanges and that this pedagogic feature of care has been overlooked and undertheorized. Care, like education, is not an investment or resource, but rather a reciprocal relationship that requires the active involvement of everyone engaged in care exchanges (Douglas, et al., 2017). Understanding care as a "dynamic pedagogical terrain" centers relationality and power and

reveals care as a “mutable, symbiotic living bond” that is inherently bidirectional regardless of whether it is symmetrical (Douglas et al., 2017). In centering acts of care throughout *AugurCon 2020*, organizers reinforced the pedagogic value of difference.

McArthur (2021) argues that receiving care, like providing it, is valuable labour and valuable knowledge that disabled people contribute to our world. She asserts the value of dependency as something that has brought her forms of knowledge and ways of working that are neither colonial nor isolationist. Similarly, disabled arts organizers Acton, Czymoch, and McCaffrey (2021) understand disability art as a process of creating connections and shared spaces while taking into account conflicting access needs, which they describe as a dance of mutual attunement, care, and responsibility. I believe this knowledge can be seen in how *AugurCon 2020* worked to be a decolonial and accessible space.

AugurCon 2020 was built by a community of people who had already been actively practicing accessibility for and with each other, circling, like Acton et al., (2021), around how to practice togetherness without requiring sameness. They, like Acton, et al., (2021) recognized that both creativity and care are composed of both labour and love. The ways in which Augur Magazine Literary Society staff and volunteers-built access and care for each other resemble both Dokumaci’s (2020) analysis of people as affordances and Watson, McKie, Hughes, Hopkins, and Gregory’s (2004) concept of needscapes.

Affordances, as originally defined by James Gibson in the field of environmental psychology, describes the relationship between environment and organism; affordances describe what is possible for a specific organism in a specific environment (Dokumaci, 2020). Dokumaci (2020) explores the concept of people as affordances through ethnographic fieldwork, describing how different individuals have either enabled the emergence of new affordances or themselves

become the missing infrastructure or tools necessary for their loved ones. Shared pain and the permeability of pain between individual bodyminds, can - under the right conditions and in resistance to the fetishization of independence that is deeply embedded in Western culture - create choreographies of collaborative affordances (Dokumaci, 2020). Throughout my time first reading for *Augur Magazine* multiple instances of acting as affordances to each other were a normalized part of our process. We discussed our personal triggers and boundaries around what we would read and traded triggering pieces to each other depending on each reader's specific triggers, needs, and capacity at the time.

Watson et al.,'s (2004) proposal of "needscapes" - a landscape conceptualization that incorporates time and space to create a view of everyday life and caring - was created to unite feminist and disability perspectives to strengthen and broaden both's ability to analyze and transform care work. This organic conception of caring makes visible the many subtle ways that caring can be interwoven. *AugurCon 2020* wove small acts of care and an openness to meeting participants' needs and facilitating participants' meeting their own needs throughout the entire event. I have been an active volunteer with many kinds of events and organizations, and I typically accept that I will need to push myself past my own capacity, that I will need to rest and recover afterwards. Instead, following *AugurCon 2020*, after the built in invitations to rest and take care of my own needs while volunteering and attending, I found myself feeling energized and profoundly grateful for an experience unlike any that I had had at previous events without disabled organizers.

Concluding By Looking Forward

AugurCon 2020 could, undoubtedly, have offered even more accessibility and mutual care – and will, I believe, better do so in future iterations. Patty Berne's (2015) disability justice

principles - articulated in 2015 as part of her work with the disability justice-based performance project, *Sins Invalid* - offer an incredibly powerful standard to aspire to in any form of organizing and could guide future *AugurCon* organizers. Additionally, Berne's principles concisely summarize and synthesize many of the core conclusions drawn from the research on care and intersectionality.

AugurCon 2020 embodied many dimensions of Berne's principles. In particular, intersectionality, an anti-capitalist politic, recognizing wholeness, cross-disability solidarity, collective access, and collective liberation - Berne's (2015) first, third, fifth, seventh, ninth, and tenth principles - were deeply embedded in the organization and realization of *AugurCon 2020*. Intersectionality - the understanding that everyone has multiple community identifications, each of which may be a site of privilege or oppression compounded and altered by each other and by the specifics of context - guided the development of the code of conduct and the voices and topics featured (Crenshaw, 2017). *AugurCon*'s commitment to an anti-capitalist politic can be seen in the use of a payment-optional model with a revenue goal. Discussing *AugurCon 2020*'s application of this model, Byrne described witnessing its success as revolutionary to their understanding of what can be done and how and who can be included (Killjoy, 2021). *AugurCon 2020* valued organizers and participants as whole people, beyond commodity or productivity, and did not treat volunteers or contributors extractively. The commitment to cross-disability solidarity and collective access was strongly embedded throughout the organization and realization of *AugurCon 2020* and future iterations will hopefully continue the work of breaking down isolation and other barriers to collective liberation.

Areas of potential growth for future iterations of *AugurCon 2020* can be seen in Berne's second, fourth, fifth, sixth, and eighth principles: leadership of those most impacted, cross

movement organizing, sustainability, and an awareness of interdependence, respectively (2015). While at least one of *AugurCon*'s primary organizers is openly disabled, as were many of the support team and speakers, future *AugurCon* organizers could prioritize leadership and representation of people with a wider range of physical and visible disabilities. Similarly, while one of *AugurCon*'s primary organizers is a woman of colour and a wide range of people of colour led *AugurCon 2020*, a larger Indigenous presence and leadership could benefit future *AugurCons*. While *AugurCon* brought multiple communities together, future *AugurCon* organizers could increase the range and breadth and make more unexpected connections. *AugurCon*'s success in honouring sustainability and embodied experience could be built on by forming larger teams, creating more opportunities for distributing labour. With more distributed labour, a broader consideration of different kinds and methods of sustainability both honouring disabled bodyminds' capacity and the capacity of the Earth and communities might be possible. Berne challenges organizers to think beyond state solutions, and it should be acknowledged that *AugurCon* benefited from state-provided arts funding and could work towards an exclusively community funded model in the future. Overall, a more expansive vision of interdependence and more concrete logistical commitments to liberatory practices could be developed. May future iterations of *AugurCon* continue to embody the knowledge that, in the words of Mia Mingus, "our work for liberation is simply a practice of love... creation of this space is an act of love" (2018).

Dedicated, with love:

to my Mama-ba, my brother and father, my Aunties, my partners and chosen family, and everyone at *Augur Magazine*.

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Appendix A

AugurCon Code of Conduct

This AugurCon Code of Conduct applies to all event staff, volunteers, attendees and guests (known henceforth as Individuals). All such individuals are expected to abide by this Code of Conduct for the duration of AugurCon on any virtual format.

AugurCon is a virtual conference hosted by the Augur Magazine Literary Society. Its online venues include YouTube panels (via Streamyard), Zoom workshops, and Discord attendee chats, in addition to Augur's social media.

HARASSMENT

AugurCon is dedicated to ensuring that this space is free of harassment, discrimination, or intimidation on the basis of:

- race, ethnicity, colour, age, sex, gender, gender expression, sexual orientation, nationality, citizenship status, disability, body size, religion, marital status, socioeconomic status, and other protected classes.

Harassment, discrimination, and intimidation include, but are not limited to:

- verbal or written (or other) unwanted comments related to the protected classes listed above, or otherwise other unwanted or unconsented contact
- stalking
- unauthorized recording
- unauthorized display of graphic or sexual/violent images/videos
- public release of private information (doxxing)
- other activities/behaviors intended to or resulting in the creation an unsafe or hostile environment within AugurCon

On consent:

We ask that attendees do **not** privately message/directly message anybody on Discord without first obtaining their consent in a public channel. This includes other attendees, volunteers, staff, and panelists.

The only exception to this rule applies to a moderation concern that needs to be addressed in private. In that situation, you may private message volunteers online and on-shift with the "Discord Moderator" role only.

If an individual feels they have been intimidated, harassed or discriminated against, or if they witness such behavior, and an individual feels unsafe or uncomfortable requesting that harassers cease the harassing behavior, we ask that a report be made to the AugurCon moderator within that space as soon as possible.

Please use the following steps when making a report:

- Reports should be made to Discord Moderators who are on shift.
- Issues with content in Discord messages from another attendee should be brought to a Discord Moderator.
- Volunteers will be moderating the YouTube stream, but if you believe further action should be taken, please direct your concerns on discord to a Discord Moderator.
- If your issue is technical in nature rather than a report, please refer to the info-and-tech-support channel in discord first. Do not directly message our tech team initially, although they may DM you in response to your concern.
- Panelists with general questions or concerns should begin by contacting their panel moderator. Panelist technical questions should be directed to the green-room channel in Discord.

Harassing behavior that occurs on AugurCon social media (including, but not limited to, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter) will be penalized accordingly.

AugurCon organizers reserve the right to determine appropriate and reasonable penalty. When approached by an AugurCon organizer and informed of harassing behavior, offenders are expected to comply with said penalty. Penalties, dependent on the degree and type of harassing behavior, may include:

- verbal or written warnings
- instructing the offender to issue a formal (public or private) apology to the complainant
- expulsion from AugurCon and all its venues
- expulsion from the Augur Magazine Literary Society's future events (in person or online)

AugurCon organizers, when issuing penalties, will do so in accordance with the safety and comfort of the individual(s) who brought forth the complaint. This includes anonymity and confidentiality.

SPEECH

Guests and attendees of AugurCon may express differing views (artistic or otherwise) during these events, on various platforms, but it is expected that these conversations, and any disagreements therein, be conducted in a respectful manner.

AugurCon acknowledges freedom of speech and freedom of artistic expression. All individuals must understand that freedom of speech does not acquit one from the consequences of such speech, especially if this speech is disruptive, counterproductive, or harmful, in any AugurCon environment. AugurCon is a curated space, where Augur's mission and values are implemented wholesale. Any harassing speech (verbal, written or otherwise) will be subject to appropriate consequences listed in the HARASSMENT section of this Code of Conduct.

ACCESSIBILITY

AugurCon is dedicated to ensuring that this virtual space is accessible to those who need it, without disclosure. All of our panels and workshops, including opening and closing ceremonies, will be open-captioned (CART) on YouTube and Zoom, and there is a half hour break between panels.

- Where possible in Discord, please refrain from the use of gifs, especially flashing or strobing lights in gifs.
- Use content warnings where possible.
 - We ask that discord messages use spoiler tags when they contain content that will likely be triggering. Messages typed between two sets of double bars [type || on either side] will automatically show up as spoilers. e.g., “CW: topic || your message goes here ||”

AugurCon reserves the right to amend these policies at any time without notice and reserves the right of interpretation. However, we invite the community to hold us accountable for how we conduct our space. If any individual has any questions or concerns about the information laid out in this Code of Conduct, they are encouraged to contact Kerry Seljak-Byrne and Terese Mason Pierre at augurcon@gmail.com