

**Chelsey Campbell**

**SPAR²C | Research Creation & Crisis**

**Slide 1: Crip Advisor**

Good afternoon, it’s a real privilege to be sharing this space with you all today. My name is Chelsey Campbell, my pronouns are she/her, they/them, either or are fine but ‘they’ makes me feel very seen. To give a brief visual description of myself, I am a fat, white, non-binary femme with long brown hair parted in the centre and bushy eyebrows that peak above oversized glasses. I’m wearing a soft pistachio green linen top — the lush colour I think really pops against the array of plants behind me.

I want to say such a sincere thank you to Sean for organizing this wonderful panel, and to all the people behind the scenes, who’s labour, care, and dedication makes our gathering possible today. It’s humbling to share space with Jennifer, Christina, Jeff, and everyone in attendance.

Before we begin my talk I would like to start with situating myself in place. I’m coming to you today from my home, where I’ve been safely sheltering from the pandemic as a high-risk, chronically ill person for the last 18 months. I’m a white settler here in so-called Canada. It’s been my privilege to be born and raised in Amiskwacîwâskahikan on Treaty 6 territory. My connection to the land is grounded in the joy of warm summer soil on my hands and the fresh green smell of tomato leaves, these memories sustain me through the sharp bite of our long winters. I have learnt so many generous tender lessons from this land so I want to acknowledge my privilege as an uninvited guest here.

On the screen, there is the soft edge of rag paper on a dark wood background. My name, pronouns, my email address and website are there should you wish to reach out. If you would like to follow along to a transcript of this talk, you can find a copy on my website (chelseycampbell.com). On the top right corner of the paper, there is the Crip Advisor seal embossed into the soft rag. Two icons of the classic wheelchair user are placed back to back to form a pair of outrageous spectacles, a cheeky little nod to the lens of disability justice and crip theory through which I view the world, as well as myself.

Throughout our time together I invite you to listen to your bodymind — feel free to sit, stand, move your body, shift, turn your camera on or off, whatever is comfortable for you. I hope we can all centre care and comfort during this time.

**Slide 2: To crip a crisis**

On the screen, there’s a folded linen handkerchief with golden embroidery emerging from the bottom left corner, it rests on a brilliant ochre background, the colour echoed in the text that reads “This will take time to recover from.” The linen rests crumpled, discarded, a little worse for wear, waiting for a moment of care, a gentle caress to tenderly smooth the harsh folds in the delicate fabric.

If we were in person today, you could see I have physical impairments, my cane rests comfortably by my side like an old companion. I’m disabled, unapologetically crip. I choose to use identity-first language because disability is central to how I view the world around me and how, in turn, the world views me. It’s how I move through space, and what spaces I occupy or have access to, how I make and hold space for myself and others. In this time of Covid, this concept of space feels particularly terse as the pandemic has profoundly impacted the disabled community and what spaces, if any, we can occupy. Reduced down to our co-morbidities, we have suffered a global act of erasure, of eugenics. So to identify as crip, to crip space, time, and even crisis becomes an overt political act, an act of radical care, a critical reframing that celebrates resiliency and firmly makes space for disabled bodyminds. *This will take time to recover from.*

**Slide 3: Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha**

If you are not familiar with the word ‘crip,’ then let me say how honoured I am to introduce you to some pure queer disabled magic, and acknowledge and give gratitude to the labour of queer disabled femmes of colour — their leadership and generosity makes this conversation possible. I think what it means to identify as crip, our complexity and wholeness, is best summed up in the brilliant words of disabled writer and Sins Invalid performer Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha: **“Our crip bodies are gifts, brilliant, fierce, skilled, valuable. Assets that teach us things are relevant and vital to ourselves, our communities, our movements, the whole goddamn planet.”[[1]](#footnote-0)** This is the central tenant of my research creation practice throughout this cruel pandemic — How can we uphold crip community, and celebrate narratives of joy and resiliency in a time of profound uncaring, grief, isolation, and loss. How can we crip a crisis?

**Slide 4: *Receipts***

A collection of papers accumulate in an orderly grid, each one containing a note of urgent pleading, anger, despair. The pages feel almost institutional in their format, an overwhelming catalogue of grievances and harm with punctuations of yellow manila envelopes and medical data. Blooms of bruising mar the surface, embracing the edges of the often quiet, pleading text. *“Can you hear me? Can you see me?”*

In Johanna Hedva’s *Sick Woman Theory* they explore the *“trauma of not being seen.*”[[2]](#footnote-1) At the beginning of the pandemic, the sick and disabled communities experienced a radical shift, we were given new access, access that many of us had been begging for for years, to work from home in the “majestic disabled revolutionary space”[[3]](#footnote-2) of our beds. Crip technoscience enabled classes to shift online, and for those privileged few to work from home a whole Zoom universe was formed. And yet, the disabled community was not considered in this online world building, lack of ASL interpretation, subtitles, and visual descriptions were the norm, which meant that the disabled community was once again not seen, not heard. That this “new normal” felt a whole lot like the old normal — built on the same tired foundation of careless ableist rhetoric. A new trauma, a new receipt to issue.

**Slide 5: *Receipts* (details)**

*receipts* is an ongoing project in which I imagine myself as the Resident Crip Advisor, my very own administrative assistant cataloguing acts of ableism enacted on my body and my community in social, institutional, and internalized space. Each piece an emotional labour invoice, a receipt, which did little to repair the harm but gave space to the trauma, and spoke to insidious volume and frequency of ableism and disablism. Occasional love notes to my body or to my community disrupting the din of melancholia, softly whispering “I hear you, I see you, I miss you. *I miss us.”*

**Slide 6: *All dressed up, no place to go***

As weeks turned to months, this hunger to be in community became overwhelming — I think we all found ourselves yearning for the embrace of a friend, to share a meal, to make and hold space together. *all dressed-up/no place to go* explores this yearning for care and touch intimacy. Replicating the familiar form of my mobility aid, the handle of the walking stick is adorned and wrapped in warm cotton rag paper composing a deformed femur. Using medical scan datasets, my body has been virtually reconstructed – sliced into paper-thin morsels of data that trace the irregular contours of my malformed bone.

**Slide 7: *All dressed up, no place to go* (detail)**

I attend to my body with such tenderness, agonizing over every ache, snap, and grind as tendons and bone clash. I wonder does this simulacrum carry the memories of care, does it miss being nestled in the soft, fatty cradle of my thigh? What does it mean to hold your hip in your hands? To sculpt it layer by layer, aligning the edges by fingertips gently, softly tracing the cut boundaries. To walk with it by your side, palm cupping the bulbous protrusion of bone.

**Slide 8: *All dressed up, no place to go* (detail)**

There's a hushed intimacy to spend time with your body, to feel the contours of flesh and form, to empathize with and for our unseen edifice. Fabricated from reclaimed silkscreen prints, the layered surface demands a gentle touch as it's refined and softened through the repetitions of a worn piece of fine-grit sandpaper. Through touch, the details of ink-stained memories captured on each layer and striation are erased and altered to form something new. And I wonder, what will emerge of this collective trauma? And what will be erased?

**Slide 9: *All dressed up together***

In quiet disuse the cane rests, waiting, uncertain of a time and place where community can safely share space once again. A time where we all can have access to care and rest for our collective wounds. *We’re still waiting.*

**Slide 10: Aurora Levins Morales**

Throughout the pandemic, I’ve found such comfort in stories. The tales we tell each other, the narrative threads from community and friends have provided safe harbour from the ableist rhetoric crashing down with each wave of the pandemic. There’s power in stories, a healing salve for collective trauma and loneliness. Disabled Latina activist, writer, poet, performer, wearer of so many fabulous hats, Aurora Levins Morales beautifully captures the generative capacity of sharing our pain, our trauma, and grief.

*“The stories we tell about our suffering define what we can imagine doing about it. ... in telling each other about the fabric of our daily lives, we could see how our strands were part of something much larger, that the struggles we faced in our relationships, our sexuality, our work and educational lives, our sense of self and purpose—none of them were isolated problems caused by personal defects of character, as we’d been told. Once we understood them and framed them to each other and ourselves as societal, outrage took the place of shame.” [[4]](#footnote-3)*

**Slide 11: *In Stitches (tender threshold)***

A hand-me-down handkerchief gifted from my maternal grandmother to my mother and to now me rests on the screen. It’s an unassuming cloth, a linen handkerchief with a simple filigree detail situated in the right corner. Its simple and straightforward design echoes the sturdy women that held it before me. The cloth is etched with an expression of embodiment and care held *tenderly, tenderly* throughout isolation. A slight shift in the material behind the text hints to a memory of embodiment, a corporeal imprint, the soft edges and fatty folds sighing into a position of rest. *Tenderly, tenderly.*

**Slide 12: *In Stitches (recovery time)***

Sourcing text from disabled writers, conversations with my community, as well as personal journal entries from the pandemic, each cloth is etched with a fragment of our story — a narrative thread captured on the surface. The laser engraver critically exposes the warp and weft of the handkerchief, requiring a delicate touch to keep the text from fraying and disintegrating from the surface of the weave. The fragile state of the handkerchief mirrors the tender state of our stories, of recovery and care. *In Stitches* urges the viewer to slow down, sit with fragility, celebrate the intersectional form, and deeply care for the embodied knowledge and capacity of crip bodyminds.

**Slide 13: *Cripkerchiefs* (installation)**

I think there’s something magical about handkerchiefs, like our stories, they are kept close. Tucked safely away in our pockets to absorb the residual warmth of our bodies — only to be plucked from that warm embrace to offer comfort and care to ourselves, or to extend an act of care and kindness to another. To wipe away tears from grief or anger or laughter, or some potent cocktail of all of the above. They catch our secrets and hold them for us.

*Cripkerchiefs* is my latest body of work, currently installed at Latitude 53’s Schmoozy exhibition (which I have the distinct privilege of sharing space with Christina’s beautiful and tender work *heavy times/try to remember what it is you need*).

Six handkerchiefs made from laser-cut Japanese tissue papers hang from clear acrylic panels — suspended off the wall, they gently breathe and sigh as bodies move in the space surrounding them. Each handkerchief is floating on a bed of soft cotton rag paper, the fragile slip of tissue resting gently on the surface. Brilliant lush colours of sky blue, ochre, and flame orange are arranged in a row, the alternating colours resembling some sort of celebratory bunting.

**Slide 14: *Cripkerchiefs (IYKYK)***

Delicate loops of lace with interwoven patterns embrace the edges of the linen. The sky blue washi turning to a warm tan where the laser scorched the surface of the thin tissue. The centre of the handkerchief is almost entirely consumed by the text *“QUEER CRIP MAGIC.”* It’s almost too bold for something so fragile, so delicate, and yet is unapologetically held in place with a sincere precociousness.

**Slide 15: *Cripkerchiefs (IYKYK* detail)**

Using archival imagery of wedding handkerchiefs, this project celebrates the labour of femmes, and narratives of disabled joy, community and resistance. These handkerchiefs were traditionally generated by the hands of women and carried as a precious belonging due to the fragile and vulnerable nature of the cloth. Illness, disability, vulnerability and care labour are often feminized,[[5]](#footnote-4) historically and contemporarily carried by the labour of femmes, particularly poor, immigrant femmes of colour.[[6]](#footnote-5) *cripkerchiefs* is a response, a love letter to Hedva’s *Sick Woman Theory*. it “is for those who are faced with their vulnerability and unbearable fragility, every day, and so have to fight for their experience to be not only honoured, but first made visible.”[[7]](#footnote-6)

**Slide 16: *Cripkerchiefs (Take all the time you need)***

Small threads interlock together to form a delicate, majestic ochre cloth. Less ornate than the former handkerchief but no less spectacular, the strength from the interweaving fibres is overt, apparent as they dance around the edge of the linen holding each other together so tightly. “*Crip time, all the time”* calls out from the centre of the cloth.

**Slide 17: *Cripkerchiefs (Take all the time you need* detail)**

A reminder to take your time, that care and recovery does not happen on a schedule. That in this time as we recover from the continued grief and loss of this pandemic, to centre our bodyminds and to listen, to see, to rest, in equal time and measure.

**Slide 18: *Cripkerchiefs (Not one bit)***

A flame orange cloth sits in the centre of the page, its folds stretching, reaching out from the page, begging to be touched, smoothed out by the hand of the viewer. In the bottom right corner text emerges from the threads, “*NOTHING ABOUT / NOTHING WITHOUT.*” A gentle call to the slogan of the Disability Justice movement. The weave of the linen is more overt in this work, gently fraying, dissolving into the rag paper when the threads were too overwrought by the heat of the laser. The cloth remains held together by the comforting support of the surrounding threads.

**Slide 19: *Cripkerchiefs (Not one bit* detail)**

I see the threads of these works as interdependence, that there is so much strength when the threads of our narratives and our communities come together. There’s so much strength in the collective. That when we uphold the embodied knowledge of ourselves and others we can find deeply intertwined connections to each other. So I return to the initial question I asked — how do you crip a crisis? I think the answer has become apparent, we do so together, as a collective, making space with and for each other, to uphold and care for our stories. *Nothing about us, nothing without us. Not one bit.*

**Slide 20: Final slide**

We end where this talk where we began with that pillowy soft sheet of embossed rag paper. If you would like to continue the conversation outside of this lovely corner of the internet we’ve created today, please feel free to reach out to me at [chelseyc@ualberta.ca](mailto:chelseyc@ualberta.ca).

That’s spelt c h e l s e y c @ualberta.ca.

Thank you for being in community with me today.

1. Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice*, (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018), 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Johanna Hedva, “Sick Woman Theory,” 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice*, (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018), 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Tala Khanmalek, “‘A Revolution Capable of Healing our Wounds:’ An Interview with Aurora Levins Morales,” *nineteen sixty nine: an ethic studies journal* 2, no.1 (2013): 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Johanna Hedva, “Sick Woman Theory,” 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. The Care Collective, *The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence,* (London: Verso, 2020), 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. Johanna Hedva, “Sick Woman Theory,” 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)