EXPLORING ACCESS TO THE ARTS FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES IN PETERBOROUGH-NOGOJIWANONG

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ABSTRACT

Exploring Access to the Arts for People with Disabilities in Peterborough-Nogojiwanong

Jessica Scott

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in drastic impacts for people with disabilities across Canada. The pandemic opened questions about what meaningful access practices are and how these can be utilized to better engage people with disabilities in the arts. 10 participants, comprised of people with disabilities, were recruited for semi-structured interviews to understand their experiences with the local arts over the past five years. Five themes arose within the data findings, including: *Access as Community-Based Care*, *On the Fringe*, *Access Labour*, *Passive Consumption*, and *Neoliberal Compliance*. A document analysis was conducted to compare the participants' views on effective access practices to the recommendations included in the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act*. Using a critical disability studies lens, the thesis concluded that meaningful access emerges through the grassroots work of communities, requiring ongoing communication with and between invested parties to prioritize the complex and unique needs of those with non-normative body-minds.

Keywords: Accessibility; disability; difference; Peterborough; Nogojiwanong; Covid-19; care work; disability culture; neoliberalism; the arts.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 *Setting the Stage*

I remember the performance that changed everything.

It was an unusually cold, rainy, dreary day in early September 2019. I was preparing for the opening night of *The Clarity of Brightness*, a performance piece based on the work of local poet PJ Thomas, alongside other cast members.

The show was designed as street theatre, a type of performance "staged" in outdoor public locations, such as sidewalks, parks, and parking lots. 15 minutes before the show, each of us was to "advertise" the event by going up to people who were lingering nearby, informing them of the show to sell them on attending. The show was pay-what-you-can (PWYC), meaning that audience members could pay whatever fee they would like to watch or, for this particular performance, not pay anything.

Not since I was a child had I performed for an audience. I was born with Erb's Palsy, a condition affecting the nerves in my upper left arm that limits my ability and range of motion. Growing up, I hid the limp, crookedness of my arm with long sleeves, avoiding any exaggerated movements that could draw attention to my disability. I chose not to pursue any performance-based projects, as I was convinced that an audience would solely focus on my physical difference rather than my performance. As all artists know, it is hard to hide anything on a stage.

However, with age, I grew desperately frustrated with hiding, feeling a deep absence of visibility in my life. I began dabbling in photography as an outlet for my creativity. In May of 2019, while strolling downtown to take pictures, I saw a poster for a dance class specifically marketed for people with “nuances." Despite my apprehensive nerves, I had an innate impulse to attend. *If I was uncomfortable, I could always leave*, I figured, but I needed to go.

Through attending the class, I found other people with different types of disabilities, conditions, and impairments. We all danced with the understanding that our differences were safe and welcomed within that space, wherein we could move, behave, and speak in ways that may be viewed as “weird” or “uncomfortable” in other settings, but embraced within those four walls. It was utterly freeing.

The opportunity also led me to meet the organizer, a local artist named Wes Ryan, who had been doing spoken-word poetry, dance, and theatre for more than 15 years. Wes told me that they pursued performance art specifically to be disruptive within public spaces. As a person who lives with a traumatic brain injury, their goal was to break down conventional barriers by staging a live performance within normative environments. Whereas traditional theatre productions perfectly structure and practice every movement, visual, and sound for months on-end to avoid any possible disruptions, street theatre is radically unconventional in allowing the potential for passersby to walk through the performance, for honking vehicles to be heard over the performers, and more. It creates the space for art to be messy, unpredictable, and challenging.

When Wes asked me to take part in their upcoming street theatre show, I had many reservations. Not only would a street performance be bold and audacious, but I had never even done any type of theatre on a traditional stage. It was far beyond my comfort zone. Wes assured me that I would have weeks to prepare, that they would ensure I was ready with hands-on guidance and training before determining the date to stage the show. With equal parts excitement and fear, I said yes.

The cast was comprised of people with disabilities and had disability at the center of the piece. We would be reciting the poems of PJ Thomas, whose work explores mental illness, as she lives with schizophrenia. Our performances were catered to our own unique needs and abilities, for which rehearsals were scheduled to meet our emotional and physical capacities. Every practice helped me to loosen up, and I grew more eager to bring the performance to a live audience as opening night came closer.

No one could've predicted that a torrential downpour would occur 20 minutes before the show.

All the weather networks suddenly changed their forecasts to call for heavy rain into the late evening. The weather would cause numerous problems for us. Firstly, our performance was choreographed around a very specific location behind a local pub, as we used the trees, gardens, and brick walls to structure each scene. Secondly, the rain was so heavy we could hardly walk without slipping and sliding through the mud. Not only would it create difficulties for the performers, many of whom relied on automatic wheelchairs for mobility, but we could hardly ask audience members to stand in the downpour for 15 to 20 minutes, especially for those who may have challenges standing up for long periods of time. Thirdly, the rain would decrease the number of people walking around outside, meaning there were fewer people to market the show to. Finally, though we contemplated cancelling or changing the location of the performance, the information would not be circulated in time to update those who learned of the event through social media.

With 15 minutes to spare, we discussed holding the show underneath a long, extended archway across the street from the pub. The location was accessible and could shelter us from the downpour. The archway was also close enough that we could quickly and easily redirect any audience members who were still planning on attending and were unaware of the last-minute change from the pub.

The new location also had disadvantages. We would have to quickly attempt to re-choreograph the performance to suit the narrow space, as all our movements were planned within the large open area behind the pub, with the garden serving as a crucial set piece. We had never practiced under the archway, requiring the needs of those who may encounter specific difficulties in the new space to be prioritized, to ensure they felt safe and comfortable.

After a few minutes of discussion, we decided to hold the show underneath the archway, quickly going over the last-minute alterations. The debacle had completely taken my mind off my nerves. When I saw the audience begin to form a few feet away, they slowly came back to my body as my heart rate spiked and my stomach sank.

It had been so long since I performed to an audience. I feared what their reaction would be. Would they laugh and mock me? Would they feel uncomfortable and gawk at my crooked, limp arm? Would it cause me to freeze up and forget my lines mid-performance? These thoughts raced through my mind as I worked to take deep breaths and steady my legs.

A performance is like being on a rollercoaster. Your heart pounds, your face becomes flushed, and adrenaline courses through your veins. Once you are strapped in and the ride commences, you realize that there is no means of going back or leaving. All you can do is close your eyes, remember to breathe, and let your instincts take over.

I blinked and it was over. The cast members took each other's hands and bowed as the audience clapped and cheered. We were bonded through a shared sense of pride in our resilience. We were disabled people who persevered in tumultuous weather conditions because we were determined to make ourselves seen and heard in the most public of ways, demanding a space to take up. It mattered not whether the audience liked the show or how many people braved the cold rain to come, but that we had endured these circumstances through our performance.

We hugged and said our goodbyes before parting ways, knowing we all needed a good night's sleep to come back and do it all over again tomorrow. It was only then that the sun peaked out from behind the clouds, and I became bathed in warmth. Though my hair and clothes were soaked, and my shoes were drenched in muddy water, I beamed as I walked through the streets in a dream-like daze. I had never felt more alive.

I cannot overstate the impact the arts, and specifically, *The Clarity of Brightness,* had on my life. It fundamentally changed who I am and what I want to do, opening a world of opportunities to explore. The experience showed me how the arts can create a space in which radical transformation is possible, wherein the ableist structures shaping our daily lives can be challenged through creative expression.

Through meeting other people with disabilities in *The Clarity of Brightness,* I learned of some of the barriers which hindered their own participation in the arts, as well as the venues that were inaccessible to their sensory, mental, and physical needs. While our show prioritized accessibility for both the performers and audience, the cast members spoke of their own struggles in finding a place to belong to the local arts community.

Their stories resonated deeply with me. The arts had such a profound impact on my life and shaped me in more ways than I can describe. I wanted the same opportunities to be available to all people with disabilities and grew frustrated upon learning how these barriers were hindering their ability to engage in these worlds.

Hence, these experiences led me to writing the thesis. I sought to have an academic platform in which I could explore issues related to accessibility, disability, and the arts through an in-depth analysis. These resources would allow me to study people with disabilities one-on-one through qualitative interviews, focusing on their individual perspectives and experiences to paint a broader picture of how disabled persons perceive accessibility in Peterborough-Nogojiwanong.

1.2 *Topic of the Thesis*

The thesis explores access to the arts for people with disabilities living in Peterborough-Nogojiwanong. The research examines which access practices meaningfully help people with disabilities feel welcomed and included in arts-based spaces, and whether there are any barriers which may be hindering their participation in the arts. It further examines whether the COVID-19 pandemic may have changed the possibilities for how access can be conceptualized and enacted, as well as how disabled people's perspectives on accessibility may differ from the approaches within the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* (AODA).

1.3 *Focus of the Study*

The research draws upon the perspectives and experiences of ten participants, all of whom identified as living with a form of disability, which includes physical, mental, and sensory impairments and conditions, and chronic illness. I conducted one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with the participants, asking questions related to their involvement in the arts, their disability or disabilities, any barriers they experienced during or prior to arts-based events, and how they perceive local access practices.

For the purpose of the research, the participants were categorized as people with disabilities, even though some expressed having a tenuous relationship with the term "disability" itself during their interviews, showcasing the diversity of opinion that exists even among a relatively small sample size. Despite these tensions, the participants nevertheless viewed the experience of labelling themselves "disabled" as an empowering step in their self-identification through reclaiming the identity.

The interviewees were also required to have participated in the arts over the past five years, for which the criteria extended to both engaging in the arts as an audience member and/or as an active participant in a production. In gathering participants with various artistic backgrounds, I was able to collect a breadth of information pertaining to accessibility for audience members and for those who are employed or volunteer in productions, which contributed to the findings through providing a more nuanced understanding of what access looks like with regards to the economic implications.

1.4 *Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of this study is to understand how people with disabilities conceptualize access to determine what meaningful access practices are, as well as whether there are any obstacles or barriers that may be hindering disabled people’s participation in arts-based spaces.

The research explores how effective access can be envisioned by those who are impacted through the confines of social and structural conditions that are not designed for their body-minds. For example, when an accessible space is reduced to a physical structure containing ramps for wheelchair users, people with other types of disabilities have their specific needs erased and ignored (Fritsch, 2013). While features like ramps are essential to creating access, a fixed approach reproduces a static notion of how meaningful accessibility can transpire to meet a multitude of needs.

I therefore seek to better understand how the 10 participants envision effective access practices, as well as whether their views may differ from institutional approaches with regards to mandates like the AODA. These types of government-mandated legislatures often reproduce "checklist" formulas that presume people's needs without acknowledging the differences among people with disabilities and fail to account for the ways access needs may change in response to developments through the years (Papalia, 2018).

Through interviewing people with disabilities, I further designed the study for the purpose of "giving voice" to the participants. Historically, disabled people are a disenfranchised group and have been derived of their own expression when discussing their views and experiences, even when specifically speaking to matters related to disability (Ashby, 2011). As the researcher, I wanted to provide a study in which the participants could thus speak for themselves, rather than quantifying their experiences or paraphrasing their words, to allow them to share their stories with the knowledge that they are the experts of their own experiences.

1.5 *Research Questions*

The four main research questions were developed over the course of two years. When I initially conceived of the project in late 2019, I intended to situate the research firmly within the context of local access to the arts. However, upon the COVID-19 pandemic creating massive societal changes, I was not only forced to suspend the study, but reconsider the questions I was contemplating within the context of the pandemic because it radically altered how accessibility could be enacted. I then realized that it would be impossible to avoid the pandemic when exploring matters related to current access practices, and that doing so may inadvertently work to hinder and diminish the potential insights that could come from the study.

I wanted to structure the research questions to touch upon four specific themes: access, barriers, COVID-19, and institutions. I believed that these would provide a comprehensive picture of how people with disabilities perceive accessibility within Peterborough-Nogojiwanong, at least according to the perspectives of the participants I would be interviewing. The four research questions I have are thus: 1) how do people with disabilities define “access”, 2) from the perspectives of the participants, are there barriers in access to the local arts, 3) has COVID-19 impacted access to the arts in Peterborough, and if so, how, and 4) how do participant perceptions of access compare with the standards outlined in the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act*?

1.6 *Background Context*

The relationship between disability and the arts is tied with cultural, political, and social meaning, with rich legacies that have grown over the previous decades. However, disabled people’s participation in artistic spaces traces back to American freak shows, a spectacle that fetishized and commodified their bodies for the able-bodied gaze, along with Native Americans, Black persons, and people of colour. The productions displayed the performers in specific ways to emphasize and exaggerate their non-normative characteristics, even while lacking their informed and sane consent (Clare, 2015). During a time in which people with disabilities had such little access to well-paying job opportunities that their only viable options were to either become beggars or be carted into institutional care, they had few choices but to become performers in exploitative productions to earn livable wages (Oliver, 1990). Freak shows thus provide a glimpse into the history of disabled people’s complicated participation in the arts.

Freak shows declined in the mid-twentieth century, alongside advancements to science and medicine, the growing industries of film media (Garland-Thomson, 2005), and World War I, which led to increased visibility of disability through injured veterans (Fritsch, 2014). Disabled people then began to form their own communities to share knowledge, resources, and support (Hamraie, 2016). The Disability Arts Movement of the 1980s saw artists utilize theatre, dance, poetry, music, and visual arts to bring attention to the social inequalities disabled people faced in their daily lives through areas such as hiring and housing discrepancies, and to advocate for increased access to arts-based spaces through more inclusive practices (Solvang, 2012; Swain & French, 2000). Art was used to challenge ableist stereotypes that regarded disabled people as child-like and incapable, as artists portrayed their disabilities as holding valuable and unique insights, for which their poor social status was cited as being caused by systemic inequality rather than the inherent conditions of their body-minds (Chandler et al., 2018; Swain & French, 2000). Through depicting themselves as leading whole and fulfilling lives, the movement thus challenged the ideologies intrinsic to the medical model that characterizes disability by pain and suffering (Swain & French, 2000).

Over the past few decades, significant progress has been made to create more accessibility and equity for people with disabilities, largely due to political groups like The Disabled People's Movement protesting these social barriers and demanding greater inclusion in social life. Acts like the *Accessibility for Americans with Disabilities Act* (ADA) and the AODA reflected the need to further integrate accessibility into government legislature to improve upon official policies and practices (Hamraie, 2016). People with disabilities continue to advocate for better practices to increase access to the arts to make these spaces more equitable for marginalized groups. In recent years, organizations and facilitators in Peterborough-Nogojiwanong have made strides to incorporate inclusive practices such as ASL interpreters (Woodcock, 2020) and relaxed performance (LaMarre et al., 2019) into their shows, both of which center accessibility as a core component in their productions rather than trivial afterthoughts.

However, the outbreak of COVID-19 in early 2020 temporarily suspended progress for more accessible in-person performances due to the contagiousness of the virus and the resulting government-mandated public health measures enforcing physical distancing and isolation (Grunawalt, 2021; Jeannotte, 2021). Artists and art organizations turned to alternative digital platforms, such as Zoom, to upload and deliver live performances and exhibitions to audiences who could watch and/or participate from their home (Rice et al., 2021). Facilitators turned to disability culture to continue to engage in the arts for income and to remain connected to their communities, which helped to prevent individuals and organizations from leaving the arts sector altogether to find more viable sources of income and revenue (EC3, 2020).

There is more importance in advocating for accessibility now than ever because the pandemic saw people with disabilities being denied the same care and economic resources granted to able-bodied groups, revealing how prevalent “better dead than disabled” attitudes continue to be, despite disabled people being more vulnerable to severe illness and death upon contracting the virus (Rice et al., 2021, para. 2). Their heightened vulnerabilities thus increased disabled people’s need for virtual access, as well as the presence of anti-mask groups who refused to abide by public health measures and increased the risk factors for vulnerable persons (Grunawalt, 2021). These attitudes revealed the disregard people have for disabled people’s lives, as the demand for the world to return to pre-pandemic times ignores that fact that the world was never fully physically, socially, and economically accessible for people with disabilities (Rice et al., 2021). These attitudes exemplify the ways futurities are envisioned through the prism of able-bodiedness and able-mindedness, as Kafer (2013) writes, “it is the *very absence* of disability that signals this better future. The *presence* of disability, then, signals something else: a future that bears too many traces of the ills of the present to be desirable.” (p. 2, original emphasis). Access to the arts is vital for bringing attention to the marginalization and discrimination people with disabilities continue to experience to create meaningful social change.

The pandemic created new possibilities for how accessibility can be expanded upon to increase disabled people’s participation in the arts. The past few years have demonstrated that mainstream society can engage in disability culture to make events and programs accessible for all audiences, so long as there is a willingness and desire to do so. Therefore, this research seeks to fill a gap in literature pertaining to access to the arts in Peterborough-Nogojiwanong, as no studies have been conducted in this area focusing on the impacts of COVID-19 on accessibility for people with disabilities. The region of Peterborough-Nogojiwanong is a rich area to study because it contains many thriving, unique arts communities, particularly as a mid-size city, which provides a close-knitted quality that makes it distinct from other Canadian cities like Toronto (Bain and McLean, 2013).

In expanding on meaningful access practices and identifying what barriers may be hindering access to the arts for people with disabilities, that information can be utilized to improve access and increase attendance and engagement with arts events, thereby helping organizations recover from the tremendous impacts of the pandemic. Furthermore, the research may be beneficial for organizations beyond pandemic-based reasons, as facilitators may be interested in improving upon their access practices to appeal to a wider audience. Arts organizations may also be interested in learning how they can make changes to improve accessibility within their programs, as well as current practices that are considered effective.

1.7 *Chapter Breakdown and Main Argument*

Chapter one introduces the thesis topic and provides an overview of its purpose, relevance, and contributions. In chapter two, I explore the literature in areas related to the topic, beginning with *Models of Disability*, which looks at the various theoretical frameworks that were developed to examine disability, such as the medical model and the social model of disability, as well as more recent frameworks like the affirmative model. It will also provide the criticisms of each model to further showcase how these developed in response to changing discourse within the field of disability studies. Afterwards, in *Intersectionality*, I will review the progression within disability studies scholarship that was influenced by Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, to account for the difference and diversity in experience among people with disabilities based on their gender, sexuality, and race. Then I will explore the literature of *Critical Disability Studies*, which developed to research disability as a methodological approach rather than as a subject of study, to better understand the structural inequalities, such as ableism, impacting those who are coded as having non-normative features rather than simply those who are pathologized as "disabled" through a colonial medical lens. In *Accessing the Arts*, I will discuss the legacy of disabled people's inclusion in the arts through a historic lens, which includes the early 20th century freak shows and the Disability Arts Movement of the 1980s. It will also explore how disabled people fought for greater inclusion in artistic spaces, as it preceded the creation of more radical access practices like relaxed performance. The following section, *Local Arts***,** outlines Peterborough-Nogojiwanong's socio-political histories in relationship to arts sectors. Finally, *COVID-19, the Arts, and Disability Culture* examines the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts on arts industries and people with disabilities, as well as how disability culture was adopted by mainstream society to adapt to life with the virus.

In Chapter three, *Methodology***,** I will discuss the personal experiences which led me to the research questions, and the two methodologies I utilized to analyze the findings, critical disability theory and Open Access. The chapter will further explore the research process, the participants, and how my own social position informed and implicated the sampling, and interview methods I chose in deciding to work with people with disabilities. A brief overview of the document analysis on the AODA will also be provided.

Chapter four, *Emerging Themes*, includes the main themes which emerged through the findings of the participant interviews. These themes include *Access as Community-based Care, On the Fringe*, *Access Labour*, *Virtual Consumption*, and *Neoliberal Compliance*. I begin with expanding on the framework I utilized to connect the findings to concepts and theories within the wider scholarship of disability studies. Afterwards, I explore the themes through the participants' interview quotes, highlighting notable perspectives and experiences that were expressed during our conversations on local accessibility measures. The participants reflected upon effective and ineffective access practices, the barriers hindering their participation, the laborious process of searching for accessibility, how their engagement in the arts was impacted by COVID-19, and their views on the AODA. Overall, the chapter seeks to illustrate how effective access practices are based within community work that strives to care for and prioritize people with disabilities, and the need to engage in ongoing, active dialogue to account for their unique needs within arts-based spaces.

In chapter five, *Discussion*, I continue to analyze the findings with relation to how these align with the literature. It begins with the document analysis on the AODA to determine the similarities and differences between the Act and the participants' views on accessibility, further delving into a critique of the Act's approach towards disability and access practices. Afterwards, I reflect upon the findings in connection to the four research questions, to understand the specific practices the participants perceive as meaningfully increasing accessibility to the local arts and the ways that static accommodations can reproduce marginalizing and stigmatizing barriers. I also discuss the importance of having virtual options for in-person events, as well as how access practices which are based within care work challenges neoliberal approaches to accessibility through centering community, reciprocity. and interdependence. The chapter closes with a reflection on the contributions to the conceptual framework and a discussion on the study's limitations.

Chapter six brings the thesis to a *Conclusion*. I provide an overview of the overarching highlights of the findings from the participant interviews and the document analysis. Then, I discuss the implications for future studies, finishing with my concluding thoughts on the research topic.

The thesis argues that meaningful access emerges through the grassroots work of communities, requiring ongoing communication with and between invested parties to prioritize the complex and unique needs of those with non-normative body-minds. As opposed to institutional approaches which center able-bodied and able-mindedness through government-mandated policies, such as the AODA, meaningful access gives power back to people with disabilities through centering and prioritizing their voices over long-term, sustained conversations.

1.8 *Contributions of the Research*

This thesis is intended to contribute to current literature on disability studies in Canada. The research was designed to center the knowledge and worldviews of people with disabilities living in Peterborough-Nogojiwanong, a particular geographical location which has not yet been explored in the literature with regards to arts accessibility for people with disabilities. As the city is rife with rich socio-political histories related to arts sectors, it is deeply valuable and essential area to study in relation to disability, accessibility, and the arts (Bain and McLean, 2013). Additionally, there is a gap in the literature related to understanding the impacts COVID-19 may have had on disabled people's understandings of meaningful access practices. The pandemic demonstrated how mainstream society can successfully engage in disability culture to facilitate accessibility through technology, thus opening new possibilities for how access can be envisioned, implemented, and enacted.

The study's conceptualization of "meaningful access practices" was heavily influenced by Carmen Papalia's (2018) concept of Open Access, which frames access as a sustained communication between able-bodied people and people with disabilities, wherein these relationships are based within the desire to understand and respond to people's individual needs in an expression of radical care. The paradigm strives to challenge the dominant power structures that frequently undermine accessibility and disempower people with disabilities, due to either the ineffectiveness or absence of state-facilitated resources, as a dependence on these can lead to further isolation within one's community. Therefore, I hope to contribute to the literature in showcasing how disabled people's views on meaningful access intersects with the tenets of Open Access, to further utilize the findings to advocate for policies which more closely align the perspectives expressed in the study.

Furthermore, the research was also designed with the goal of helping local arts organizations pursue effective access practices, specifically in the context of recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic. Through exploring the practices and features that are considered meaningful to people with disabilities, I hope organizations can utilize this information to inform their own policies and practices, whether by identifying the ways in which their organization is succeeding in creating a welcoming, safe, accessible space for audiences or in better understanding how they can improve upon their current approach towards accessibility. As the interviews showcase, access exists within temporal and spatial contexts, for which one's needs can change over time and space. Approaching access as static and fixed accommodations undermines how disability is often experienced within changing, wavering bursts, as opposed to an unchanging continuous condition. When communities engage in ongoing, active, open conversations pertaining to access, rather than viewing it through a concrete lens of having achieved/not achieved access, it better reflects the fluid realities of disability and accessibility.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

The *Literature Review* begins with outlining the conceptual framework I will be using throughout the remaining chapters. This section will provide an overview of the various *Models of Disability* to explore how disability and people with disabilities have been conceptualized in academic discourse. The medical model and the social model will be explored, leading up to the affirmative model, which I utilized to center my own understanding of disability within the research process.

Afterwards, *Intersectionality* will focus on literature that takes an intersectional focus to examine the complex lived experiences people with disabilities have based on their gender, sexuality, and race. As I referenced an intersectional lens within my analysis of the findings, there is an importance in highlighting these diverse, ranging experiences when conducting research that delves into disabled people's encounters with barriers and accessibility, to better understand how these experiences are multifaceted and unique.

From there, I explore *Critical Disability Studies*, a recently developed discipline within disability studies scholarship that seeks to place a larger focus on the role of institutions in perpetuating systemic inequalities towards groups who are categorized as disabled through various types of non-normative attributes. Critical disability studies adopts an interdisciplinary lens when analyzing matters related to disability, particularly in regards to the social oppressions disenfranchising marginalized groups. A critical disability focus will thus be utilized within my methodological approach to the research in exploring the participants' experiences with (in)accessibility, as well as the power dynamics intrinsic within my relationship to the topic and the participants as a researcher.

Following these sections covering the theoretical scholarship, I will then delve into the literature exploring various approaches to create accessibility for people with disabilities within the arts. *Accessing the Arts* chronicles the historical roots of disabled people's participation in the arts, tracing the social and structural barriers continuing to hinder their access. This section then examines current approaches to increase access to the arts for people with disabilities, such as relaxed performance. I will also further expand upon Open Access, the second methodological framework I will base my working understanding upon to determine meaningful access practices.

The subsequent section *Local Arts* will provide a comprehensive picture of the geographic location of Peterborough-Nogojiwanong to capture the scene wherein the qualitative research takes place. *Local Arts* will thus cover the socio-political-economic histories which have shaped the current arts sectors, outlining the various programs, events, and festivals which are run through the thriving local arts community.

Finally, *COVID-19, the Arts, and Disability Culture,* will delve into the COVID-19 pandemic and the impacts the virus had on the arts in Canada, as well as how disability culture was utilized to rebound from these impacts, despite the inadequate government-mandated health measures marginalizing people with disabilities. I will use this section to situate the contexts that will be explored through the research with relation to how the pandemic created the conditions to envision possible ways accessibility can be enacted through disability culture.

The chapter will conclude with consideration for the *Contributions to the Literature,* to discuss the gaps in the research that make the findings valuable to the local arts community in Peterborough-Nogojiwanong. The main research questions, goals, and purpose will also be briefly reflected upon before delving into the *Methodology* chapter.

2.1 *Models of Disability*

The medical model of disability was developed in the mid-20th century and encompassed a biomedical perspective, viewing disability as a personal affliction that requires the individual to either "overcome" their condition to integrate back into normal living or to seek a cure through medical intervention and rehabilitation (Clare, 2001; Marks, 1997; Oliver, 1990). The biomedical approach grants physicians the institutional power over their patients to legitimize their disabilities through providing a diagnosis, determining whether they can access social programs, benefits, and medical technologies, such as wheelchairs (Marks, 1997; Oliver, 1990). The medical model views cure as synonymous with hope, with the total eradication of disabilities being positioned as the solution to the social problems disabled people experience (Clare, 2001). Global organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO) reproduce the principles within the medical model through investing economic resources into preventing and rehabilitating disabilities, rather than changing the material conditions that are responsible for marginalizing and excluding people with disabilities (Marks, 1997). The medical model therefore locates disabled people's body-minds as the site of personal shortcomings while neglecting to account for the social inequalities which contribute to poor health care, inadequate housing, and poverty, as well as the impacts that stigmatization and discrimination have on disabled people's health and wellbeing (Marks, 1997).

Criticisms have been made towards the medical model for framing disability as a personal tragedy (Marks, 1997; Swain & French, 2000), which Oliver (1990) refers to as "the grand theory" overarching academic discourse on disability (p. 1). Swain and French (2000) argue that within a society that excludes and alienates those with non-normative body-minds, the tragic narrative is a rational response to able-bodied people who face the continuous and unabating threat of becoming disabled themselves throughout their entire life course. For Marks (1997), fixed categories are created through the "othering" of disabled people, because it allows able-bodied people – who are responsible for imposing these narratives – to quell their own unease about becoming disabled themselves. Ultimately, the tragic view does nothing to challenge the stigmatizations and structures that are responsible for excluding disabled people - particularly those who are unable or unwilling to be cured - because these inequalities are too viewed as inevitable (Oliver, 1990; Swain & French, 2000). The tragic narrative also feeds into the "supercrip" trope, wherein disabled people are framed as heroic or inspirational for overcoming the inherent helplessness of disability simply when doing their everyday tasks (Clare, 2001; Doonan, 2021). Similarly, the charity view is also evoked within tragic frameworks, as disabled people are characterized as poor, helpless figures to encourage able-bodied populations to make donations to causes which seek to engineer a cure for their conditions (Clare, 2017), relieving their own moral responsibility to challenge the structures which uphold ableism (Garland-Thomson, 2005).

The social model was introduced as a response to the medical model's biological focus. In the 1980s, Mike Oliver (2013) created the social model to expand beyond an individualized approach that regarded impairments as problems disabled persons needed to either cure or overcome. It was designed to operate as a political framework to organize and demand better policies to improve disabled people's social and economic conditions through specific and comprehensive goals (Shakespeare, 2021). The social model argues that disabilities are created through inaccessible physical environments that are designed to exclude certain bodies and abilities, rather than viewing impairments as the cause for disabilities. For example, someone who uses a wheelchair becomes disabled when attempting to enter a building that contains stairs, whereas a building designed to include a ramp would erase the presence of their disability (Marks, 1997).

The social model helped to spark grassroots organizing among disabled communities, as it ushered in organizations like the Disabled People's Movement, who wanted to challenge the structural inequalities which marginalized them as a group (Oliver, 2013). As Clare (2001) writes, rather than bodies, "it is ableism—disability oppression, as reflected in high unemployment rates, lack of access, gawking, substandard education, being forced to live in nursing homes and back rooms, being seen as childlike and asexual—that needs changing." (p. 360). The social model also challenges the industrial power imbalance within medical approaches, as physicians are able to control a patient's care through medical gatekeeping, determining whether they have access to certain programs and resources, while policy-makers control who is considered "deserving" of social programs and financial help (Marks, 1997). Therefore, the social model critiques the ways in which oppression is reproduced within these spaces through granting medical professionals the power to make decisions for their body-minds, rather than disabled people themselves (Clare, 2017).

Nevertheless, the social model has received criticisms for minimizing the role of impairments, chronic illness, and pain (Kafer, 2013; Shakespeare, 2021; Swain & French, 2000; Wendell, 2001). As the social model views disabilities as being constructed through environmental/structural obstacles, it fails to recognize how impairments continue to exist beyond those barriers (Swain & French, 2000). Kafer (2013) believes that the model fails to advocate for disabled people who choose to undergo medical treatment to soothe or cure the undesirable conditions of their disabilities. While the social model critiques structures rather than bodies, Swain and French (2000) argue that it reproduces tragic narratives similar to the medical model through focusing on the problems disabled people face, viewing this as "in itself disabling. It denies disabled people’s experiences of a disabling society, their enjoyment of life, and their identity and self-awareness as disabled people.” (p. 574). Criticisms have also been made for model’s failure to incorporate an intersectional lens to understand the unique lived experiences black people, Indigenous people, people of colour, queer people, women, and aging persons with disabilities have with power and privilege (Oliver, 2013). As Shakespeare (2021) notes, because the social model was founded primarily by male academics with physical disabilities, it reflects their perspectives with barriers through the lens of whiteness, maleness, and heterosexuality, while also failing to account for people with non-physical disabilities.

New models have emerged in response to the critiques of the social model which seek to provide space for both biomedical and structural approaches. Swain and French (2000) created the affirmative model to challenge tragedy narratives through centering disabled lives as enriching and complete, and disabilities as providing people with unique experiences and perspectives that allow for wonder and creativity. Swain and French (2000) argue that being disabled can serve to free people from the normative life goals and prospects that are placed on able-bodied people. The experience of being disabled in a culture that excludes and stigmatizes those with disabilities can give people greater capacity for compassion in relating to others who are marginalized through their identities and bodies. It also argues that while unequal structures should be challenged and changed, people should have absolute control over their bodies, and therefore should be afforded the choice to access medical care for their impairments (Swain & French, 2000). I will be utilizing the affirmative model to ground my own understanding of disability throughout the research process.

The ways in which disabled people's body-minds are conceptualized reflects cultural and societal norms and shapes the economic and medical policies enacted to ease and/or eradicate their conditions. These ideologies are also rooted within the social structures designed to privilege able-bodied people, impacting how people with disabilities can access these spaces. The upcoming section will focus on the emergence of intersectionality within disability studies, exploring how these developed in response to Kimberlé Crenshaw's writing to account for the differences among varying disabled communities.

2.2 *Intersectionality*

Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) developed the theory of intersectionality to describe the unique ways people with a multitude of identities navigate and relate to their realities, connecting these to gender identity, race, citizenship, class, and sexual orientation. Crenshaw's work was influential in disability studies, as scholars began to pay more attention to ways in which disability correlates with gender, race, and sexuality, and how these intersections create diverse lived realities with regards to status, privilege, and power. In this section, I will explore four fields which explores these intersections, including feminist disability studies, crip studies, black studies, and Indigenous studies.

2.2.1 *Feminist Disability Studies*

According to Meekosha and Shuttleworth (2009), disability studies had been largely dominated by white male scholars until the 1980s. The embodied disabled experience was defined through whiteness and maleness in scholarship, which marginalized disabled women in academia through ignoring their perspectives and knowledge(s). Second wave feminism influenced disabled women to recognize their own collective consciousness within academic institutions, to further explore how power and privilege operates within patriarchal able-bodied power structures, leading female scholars to establish feminist disability studies (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009).

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's work (2002; 2005) focuses on feminist disability studies, as she critiques the cultural norms which code women and disabled people as inferior within hegemonic discourse, writing "disability – like gender - is a concept that pervades all aspects of culture: its structuring institutions, social identities, cultural practices, political positions, historical communities, and the shared human experience of embodiment." (Garland-Thomson, 2002, p. 4). For example, "disability" is a conceptual categorization of human anatomy which is framed as inferior to "ability," much like how "femaleness" is considered inferior when compared to "maleness" (p. 5). Neither categorization has any basis in biological "facts" but have been molded as such through cultural interpretations that are rooted within social hierarchies. Women, particularly those who are racialized and/or disabled, are constructed as the Other in cultures that privilege whiteness, ablebodied-ness, and maleness, and these hierarchies are upheld to maintain white, patriarchal dominance (Garland-Thomson, 2002).

Wendell (2001) critiques feminist politics for neglecting and excluding women with non-normative body-minds, specifically because women are statistically inclined to develop conditions that are categorized as impairments. In relation to disabilities, feminist disability studies examines how female bodies have been long been coded as sicknesses and abnormalities, and legitimized through medical knowledge (Garland-Thomson, 2002). Women whose bodies are decidedly "unfeminine" are also constructed as having disabled identities (such as the bearded lady in freak shows), through conflicting with the Western beauty standards that are premised on whiteness, thinness, and able-bodiedness (2005). These actions and attributes are constructed as disabilities and maintained through social ostracism (Garland-Thomson, 2005)

Feminist disability studies strives to unpack and dismantle culturally imbued stigmas to create space to cultivate meaningful representations for women with disabilities. Garland-Thomson (2005) writes, “women with disabilities, even more intensely than women in general, have been cast in the collective cultural imagination as inferior, lacking, excessive, incapable, unfit, and useless” (p. 1567). Disabled women are discursively written out of gendered expectations for women through their disability, and are viewed as sexless, unattractive, and unfeminine. For Alison Kafer (2013), women with disabilities, particularly developmental disabilities, are infantilized as asexual beings, as frozen within a child-like state. Their pleasure stands in sharp contrast to their disabled identities, for which all tangible markers of femininity, such as menstruation and sexuality, are viewed as aggressively conflicting with these categorizations (Clare, 2017).The mere notion that disabled women may wish to engage in romantic or sexual relationships for personal desire is too disturbing for able-bodied persons, to the extent that they will coerce disabled women to undergo invasive medical and cosmetic surgeries, such as sterilization procedures, to prevent these possibilities from developing (Kafer, 2013).

2.2.2 *Crip Studies*

Crip studies was developed in response to scholarship correlating disability to queerness, merging the two disciplines to draw upon the similarities between queer and disabled experiences. McRuer (2001) parallels these identities, noting “people with disabilities are often understood as somehow queer (as paradoxical stereotypes of the asexual or oversexual person with disabilities would suggest), while queers are often understood as somehow disabled (as ongoing medicalization of identity, similar to what people with disabilities more generally encounter, would suggest).” (p. 57 - 58). Sandahl (2003) and Clare (2015) note that the medical field has historically pathologized and stigmatized queerness and disability as preventable conditions which need to be fixed or overcome to reintegrate back into society, with queer and disabled people continuing to face barriers to economic and social opportunities (Sandahl, 2003), and disproportionate representation in rates of poverty (Clare, 2015).

Crip studies scholars have focused on challenging normative identity concepts within their work. Clare’s (2017) “body-mind” challenges dualistic Western notions that separate bodies and minds as two irreconcilable opposing entities. McRuer (2001) developed the term “compulsory able-bodiedness” - taken from Adrienne Rich’s “compulsory heterosexuality” - to explore the ways in which able-bodiedness is enforced and normalized within capitalist economic structures. One has few choices but to strive to embody able-bodiedness, because capitalism demands that workers sell their bodies to acquire labour power, for which these bodies are idealized as non-disabled “healthy” and “efficient” bodies. Hence, people have few choices but to meet these expectations within a system that demands normalcy, as failure to do so leads to social and economic ramifications. The able-bodied norm thrives on the principle that all people desire to live without disabilities, as McRuer writes, “a system of compulsory able-bodiedness repeatedly demands that people with disabilities embody for others an affirmative answer to the unspoken question, Yes, but in the end, wouldn’t you rather be more like me?” (p. 56-57).

Crip scholarship also focuses on how "queer" and "crip" are slurs that have been reclaimed by these communities as empowering identifiers, while “cripping” and “queering” are utilized to challenge cultural stereotypes concerning queer and disabled identities and bodies

(Sandahl, 2003). Eli Clare (2001) utilizes "queer" to describe their initial experiences recognizing and coming into their disabled body-mind, as their physical "queerness" (referring to their visible difference) was established through early childhood socialization (p. 361). For Clare, queerness and disability coincide as bodies which are frequently stolen through systemic discrimination and violence. Kafer (2013) conceives queer and disabled persons as navigating "strange temporalities" through existing in defiance of the institutions which seek to oppress and eradicate them for their identities; queer and crip temporalities are thus defined through *the absence* of futurities (Kafer, 2013). Clare (2001) thus views bodies as the sites for which pride can be reclaimed and resistance can be forged to the institutions that seek to eradicate their existence. Sandahl (2003) analyzes performance arts as a space where queer and disabled people can "come out" on stage to reclaim their identities (p. 41). For disabled people, empowerment often means affirming themselves as agents of their sexuality, through bold clothes, stories, and acts to challenge the infantilizing assumptions made of their body-minds (Sandahl, 2003).

2.2.3 *Black Disability Studies*

The overrepresentation of white academics within disability studies has also led to race-related criticisms. The discipline has historically explored disability through the lens of whiteness, with Chris Bell (2006) referring to the field as "white disability studies". White disabled scholars have excluded black perspectives and appropriated blackness when describing their own experiences with social exclusion and systemic barriers. Bell views this as emblematic of the problems within disabled communities, stating that "the same people who hold power in the community of scholars known as Disability Studies are a mimetic rendering of those holding power in non-disabled communities: white people." (p. 278).

Touching upon her personal experiences as a crip, queer, black female academic, Shalk (2013) notes that the field will often end up marginalizing black academics when attempting to appear more progressive. While Schalk (2021) believes recent scholarship has attempted to incorporate an intersectional analysis into its discussions on race and disability, it continues to overlook the work of black scholarship, particularly black feminist academics, writing that the "lack of engagement is due in part to the fact that even as these theories connect to issues of disability, scholars often do not explicitly position or view this work as disability studies." (p. 343). However, Erevelles and Minear (2021) view black studies and disability studies as having many similarities in their theoretical approaches, as both disability and race are identified within their respective disciplines as social constructs and relational concepts, while also grounding their frameworks within person-centered lived experiences. Black disability studies therefore strive to combine the two respective fields to lead scholarship with an intersectional analysis to understand how race, disability, gender, and class coincide for black persons and black disabled persons.

Erevelles & Minear (2021) touch upon the historical legacy of coding black and brown bodies as disabled within the United States, as it was used to justify racial and colonial violence, particularly through the enslavement of black Africans. Schalk (2017) expands upon these histories, writing that enslaved black people were coded as disabled through their alleged low(er) intelligence, while also being seen as productive enough to engage in extensive, rigorous labour through their powerful physique. As Erevelles & Minear (2021) note, to enforce the elimination of racialized groups, white colonizers coded them as barbaric, diseased, and feeble-minded. Clare (2017) discusses how enslaved black people who attempted to escape were pathologized by white psychiatrists as defective. Ableism is thus used to uphold white supremacy through constructing resistance to institutional violence as pathological disorders, thus serving to reinforce white hegemonies (Clare, 2017).

Intersectionality is critical to understanding how laws and policies continue to be used to marginalize impoverished, disabled, black women (Erevelles & Minear, 2021; Schalk, 2021). Erevelles and Minear (2021) argue "individuals located at the intersections of race, class, gender, and disability are constituted as non-citizens and (no)bodies by the very social institutions designed to protect, nurture, and empower them." (p. 313). For example, Schalk (2021) notes black women are statistically more likely experience mental illness than white women yet have far less access to the organizational supports and resources designed to help them. The systems of oppression which operate to uphold racial and gender violence therefore cannot be analyzed without also drawing connections between disability, gender, race, and class, as these systems work together to stigmatize and exclude those who live in the intersections (Schalk, 2021).

2.2.4 *Indigenous Studies*

The critiques regarding disability studies' treatment of black perspectives are also reflected within Indigenous studies. As Lovern (2022) writes, the construction of "normal" and "abnormal" bodies has historically been defined by the political and economic interests of the ruling class, who consisted of white, "healthy" male bodies (para. 2). To rationalize their violence towards Indigenous peoples, white European societies racialized their bodies and tied their features to notions of degeneracy and immorality (Lovern, 2022). Imada (2017) writes that colonialism enforced white European standards and ideals onto Indigenous bodies, as 'the colonized were always already figured and constituted as disabled, whether because of their perceived unproductivity as laborers; embodied racial-sexual differences; "unchaste" proclivities of their women; susceptibility to moral contagion and infectious diseases; or inability to learn' (para. 2). Colonizers thus re-constructed the social and economic consequences systemic racism had on Indigenous populations as innate disabilities. For example, alcoholism was constructed as an inherent trait of Indigenous peoples stemming from their biological weakness, rather than a response to decades-long discrimination and violence (Imada, 2017). Settler-colonialism thus relies upon the cultural interpretations of disability as *wrong* to label Indigenous bodies as physically, culturally, and morally inferior, which upholds their colonizing and paternalistic actions as proper and justified.

While Indigenous peoples are found to have double the rates of disabilities as non-Indigenous Canadians, recent literature critiques the term "disability" as a colonial concept that many Indigenous do not identity with (Imada, 2017; Rice et al., 2021). Lovern (2022) views disability as a Western creation which reflects whiteness and colonial legacies, noting how it produces static binaries which dichotomize identities and locates them as either superior or inferior. The term also reflects Western culture's privileging of individualization and independence, as the individual is required to overcome or fix their disabilities to return to self-reliance. Since the individual is located as responsible for beating these odds, the failure to do so is taken as a character flaw (Lovern, 2022).

However, Indigenous cultures value communal living, viewing communities as spaces to fulfill one's relationships and responsibilities to all living beings (Lovern, 2022). As opposed to Western culture's emphasis on independence, Indigenous peoples "understand that all things are in constant flux and exist as relational to all other things" and "the dynamic of engagement must be one of respect, reciprocity, and perspective." (para. 17). No body-mind is viewed as abnormal or disabled, but a source of *difference*. All differences are viewed as worthwhile and unique rather than inherently limiting, and as holding equal potential to contribute back to society in reciprocal ways. Their response to difference is to restore one's role within their communities, rather than punishing and isolating them for their conditions (Lovern, 2022). Indigenous peoples have thus worked to decolonize their own relationships to their body-minds, to challenge settler-colonial hierarchies which reduce differences to abnormalities, which Imada (2017) encourages scholars to recognize when writing on disability.

Intersectionality was a key development in disability studies, as it allowed academics to gain a more nuanced perspective for the ways gender, race, and sexuality complicate disability, rather than viewing all disabled identities as monolithic. These concepts will be reflected upon later in the findings to delve further into the analysis of the participants' experiences with accessibility and barriers. The upcoming section will explore critical disability studies, a framework which examines disability through a range of multidisciplinary approaches while maintaining an intersectional critical focus to understand how these experiences are tied to broader power structures.

2.3 *Critical Disability Studies*

Critical disability studies builds upon disability studies by encompassing a broader spectrum of academic disciplines into its analysis. The work within critical disability studies strives to combine theory with praxis-based practices, to utilize the research to produce real life social change (Goodley et al., 2019). As opposed to framing disability as the subject of analysis, disability works as a methodological approach to examine how people with non-normative body-minds experience structural inequality (Minich, 2016; Schalk, 2017). As Goodley (2013) writes, "critical disability studies start with disability but never end with it: disability is the space from which to think through a host of political, theoretical and practical issues that are relevant to all."

(p. 632). While both object-approaches and methodological approaches can reproduce problematic research practices, Goodley et al. (2019) contend that critical disability studies holds space for scholars to question their own role and be held accountable for how power is produced within knowledge-making, to avoid marginalizing disabled people when drawing upon their lived experiences. While disabled people themselves are the experts of their own experiences, Goodley et al. believe scholars have engaged in the objectification of disabled people within their research practices, rather than providing them with power as knowledge-holders. Critical disability studies implore researchers to question their own role, purpose, methods, and goals, as Goodley et al. (2019) write, "who has the right to use disability as an object of intellectual inquiry, and why? This has led us to ask of scholars engaged with disability: why are you here?" (p. 981). These questions implore scholars to be reflexive in their role as a knowledge-producer to avoid objectifying, tokenizing, and marginalizing disabled voices (Goodley et al., 2019). I have utilized these inquiries to identify my own positionality within the research process, with consideration for how my social location shapes the purpose, goals, and questions of the thesis.

The methodology of critical disability studies grew through interrelated disciplines like critical race theory (Goodley et al., 2019), feminist theory (Meekosha & Shuttlework, 2009) and crip theory (Kafer, as cited in Schalk, 2017). Meekosha and Shuttleworth (2009) view the discipline as a critical response to the binary ideologies which emerged through disability studies, such as the reliance on Marxist-based material analysis and the reductive categorizations present within the social model. The emergence of post-modernism within the humanities and social sciences led disability scholars to incorporate a far more nuanced understanding of how these social inequalities operate, as they are “not simply social, economic and political, but also psychological, cultural, discursive and carnal.” (p. 50). Like crip theory, critical disability studies resists invoking a pathologizing lens through “defining an object of analysis (no matter how expansive the definition), but rather focuses on the method of analysis instead.” (Schalk, 2017, p. 1). Minich (2016) views all scholarship critiquing the structural and social barriers which disenfranchise non-normative body-minds as critical disability studies, including research that explores discrimination towards fat people, people with illness, systemic racism, and more.

Minich (2016) and Schalk (2017) emphasize the need to base critical disability studies within an intersectional focus, particularly because disability has historically been explored through white perspectives which have neglected to include discussions on race. As noted previously, racialized populations have been coded as disabled through settler-colonialism and white supremacy (Minich, 2016; Schalk, 2017), and continue to be vulnerable to acquiring disabilities due to poor healthcare, systemic violence, and environmental racism (Minich, 2016). Critical disability studies therefore strives to incorporate a far more nuanced approach to understand how disabilities are constructed through larger structures, rather than solely basing it on an individualized approach through a biomedical lens (Meekosha & Shuttlework, 2009).

While Goodley et al. (2019) recognize that the bulk of the scholarship being written in critical disability studies pertains to Northern-based perspectives, more research is beginning to be pursued to explore global critiques on neoliberal policies, Indigenous perspectives, and the multinational impacts of settler-colonization. An analysis of settler-colonialism is also present within the scholarship to avoid reproducing Western colonial understandings of disability, particularly when reflecting upon how disabilities are produced through the conditions of colonialist ideologies and practices (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). Critical disability studies scholars should strive to be "clear, open and honest about their own local locations" even when writing through Western-based perspectives (Goodley et al., 2019, p. 979).

The neoliberal economic systems upholding the unequitable structures which contribute to disabled people's poor social and economic status remains a focus within critical disability studies. As Minich (2016) notes, neoliberal principles emphasize a reduced welfare state, economic independence, and personal freedoms and responsibilities, viewing one’s decision-making as determining one’s economic position within a free market economy. Goodley and Lawthom (2019) critique neoliberalism for reproducing ableist standards that "privileges able-bodied and minded-ness, creates social spaces only fit for normative citizens, leads to institutional-bias towards autonomous bodies and minds and encourages an economic dependence on the marketplace.” (p. 245 - 246).

Despite the economic and social advancements that were achieved for people with disabilities through as the *Americans with Disabilities Act* (ADA) (and the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* (AODA)), neoliberal ideologies are embedded into government-mandated policies, through idealizing "healthy" bodies through the lens of able-bodied capacities (Minich, 2016). Even while these acts have attempted to achieve better social equalities for disabled people, Pothier and Devlin (2006) argue that the material conditions for disabled people have instead declined through neoliberal policies, because “downsizing and retrenchment, for example, have resulted in increased marginalization and impoverishment of many persons with disabilities." (p. 6).

Goodley and Lawthom (2019) argue that neoliberalism produces an ideal “ableist citizen” for all members of society to follow. Like McRuer's (2001) concept of compulsory able-bodiedness, the ableist citizen is defined through their personal dedication to the labour force and valued for their drive to work hard in their job(s) above all other things (Goodley & Lawthom, 2019). No person can ever truly live up to these expectations because the body-mind is inherently vulnerable to changing and weakening across the lifecycle. Hence, the ableist ideal is also defined through creating fear for these inevitable futures, which works to make people even more desperate to achieve these ideals under the illusion of choice. The ableist ideal regards disabled people as holding the potential to become ideal citizens through rehabilitative services yet are also viewed as “damaged” goods for their failure to rehabilitate themselves into an able-bodied state (Goodley & Lawthom, 2019).

In recent years, the ableist ideal has been reproduced and popularized within Conservative politics, with two simultaneous socio-political events, Brexit and the 2016 election of Donald Trump, basing their respective campaigns on these ideals (Goodley & Lawthom, 2019). Goodley views the ableist ideal as central to their propaganda, as both campaigns were bolstered upon giving power and status back to able-bodied workers, with the non-productive Other who is unable to contribute to the labour force framed as a burden on society. As Goodley and Lawthom (2019) note, ableism cannot be analyzed in isolation from other systems of power, because these political campaigns were also based within white supremacy, patriarchy, nationality, and heteronormativity, with the able-bodied worker being imagined through whiteness, maleness, citizenship, and heterosexuality.

The ableist ideal was also invoked within workplace health measures throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, as the Ontario government prioritized restabilizing the economy through corporate-driven profits over employees' health and safety within their workplace. For example, rather than mandating paid sick days, these measures placed personal responsibility on employees to remain home to avoid spreading the virus without pay (D’Mello, 2022). In 2022, the Ford government also motioned to remove the five-day isolation rules for those who are infected with the virus, allowing employees to be in their workplaces with COVID-19, while “urging” those who are sick to isolate themselves when symptomatic and to avoid being in spaces with vulnerable populations (DeClerq, 2022). These policies can be taken to showcase the government’s value for the ableist ideal within the pandemic, as defined through their expectations for employees to continue working while risking their own and other people's lives. The government masks these risks under the guise of personal freedoms, all while refusing to provide workers with the economic incentives that would allow them to make a fully informed choice. The groups who are vulnerable to contracting severe forms of COVID-19, such as people with disabilities, are therefore responsible for protecting their own lives within a neoliberal economy that strives to individualize and separate people from their communities (Goodley & Lawthom, 2019). A critical disability studies lens is more important now than ever in research on disability and access, particularly as the world is forced to navigate these “post-COVID” times in an attempt to return to a certain type of able-bodied normalcy.

This section strove to reflect upon critical disability studies scholarship to situate the research through recognizing the neoliberal conditions current access practices are produced within, particularly with regards to concepts of ableist ideals and expectations. The next section will explore disabled people’s historical and current engagement with art spaces, beginning with the legacy of freak shows, which fetishized and dehumanized marginalized group’s bodies as consumer attractions, to more recent practices like relaxed performance, which strives to increase participation in the arts for all people with non-normative body-minds. Overall, I am seeking to showcase potential practices which may help arts organizations in Peterborough-Nogojiwanong increase access for people with disabilities.

2.4 *Accessing the Arts*

For people with disabilities, access to the arts is entangled with their historical marginalization in sideshow productions, otherwise known as "freak shows" (Solvang, 2012). In American freak shows, non-disabled audiences paid to consume disabled people's bodies, as their physical conditions were displayed as deviantized spectacles, alongside black and brown people who were marketed as savages and brutes, fetishized Native Americans, and other people with visible differences, such as fatness, beards, and tattoos (Clare, 2015). The performers had little control over their own displays, as their non-normative characteristics were accentuated through costuming and make-up, while their background stories were fictionalized with exaggerations and fabrications. The white, able-bodied men who ran freak shows were able to capitalize upon and exploit marginalized groups with little power and fewer legal rights, dehumanizing their personhood by turning them into caricatures for financial gain (Clare, 2015). Becoming a freak in performance-based arts was nevertheless an economic incentive for people with disabilities, who had few opportunities in the developing industrial workforce (Garland-Thomson, 2005). LaMarre et al. (2021) cite freak shows as a pivotal chapter in disabled people's history, as their exploitation showcases the importance in meaningfully representing and including people with disabilities in artistic spaces.

In the 1970s, people with disabilities began forming their own communities within the United Kingdom and the United States to create a culture wherein their own knowledge and practices could be shared amongst one another (Hamraie, 2016; Solvang, 2012). These communities allowed them to network and disperse material resources with tips on how to “get around” inaccessible barriers. Rather than viewing their disabilities with shame, these spaces reimagined their conditions as both positive and life-affirming, which fostered political desire to challenge institutional inequalities and advocate for better social and economic conditions (Hamraie, 2016). The disability arts movement arose alongside these social advancements as an artistic response to the discrimination and stigma disabled people encountered in their daily lives, to advocate for full and meaningful inclusion in society. Various artistic avenues, like dance, poetry, and song, were channeled to recognize and validate their lived experiences, and to challenge tragic narratives through highlighting the enriching advantages that come from being disabled (Swain & French, 2000). For disabled people, discrimination undermined their potential to pursue opportunities within the arts, with barriers such as inaccessible stages and shows, and discriminating hiring practices hindering their physical access to these spaces (Solvang, 2012). The arts held possibilities for disabled activists to challenge stigmatizing stereotypes through creative self-expression, while creating meaningful social change. As Chandler et al. (2018) write, "in order for disabled people to be truly liberated, we must change the way society sees us. This is the work of the artist." (p. 252).

2.4.1 *Barriers to the Arts*

Despite political progress in gaining access to education and employment opportunities, inadequate access continues to bar disabled people's participation within the arts. Physical barriers to access are shown to be a prominent obstacle, more so than cognitive barriers (Collins et al., 2022). Access barriers can occur far before an event even begins, as inaccessible parking (Collins et al., 2022), and limited/poor public transportation options (Gratton, 2020) can prevent disabled people from reaching the venue. Gratton (2020) notes that before deciding to attend arts events, disabled people are required to consider factors such as special parking costs and directions, particularly when having to attend alone, as this creates further health and safety challenges in navigating a new space. These barriers continue when inside the venue, as seating tends to be designed for able-bodied persons, with little support for one's back or legs (Collins et al., 2022). Theatre etiquette forces audience members to remain in their seats without eating, drinking, or walking, which can be an obstacle in feeling comfortable and attending to their basic needs (Collins et al., 2022).

The financial costs of attending an arts event can also reinforce economic barriers, as disabled people who are low-income or depend on government assistance can only afford their basic necessities, for example, ODSP, which makes the arts an expensive leisure activity (Gratton, 2020). Participation barriers can arise as a problem impacting their inclusion within the arts, as disabled people struggle with feeling like they are burdens for wanting their needs to be addressed (Collins et al., 2022). Research shows that disabled people have reported employees lacking proper awareness and understanding of matters related to disability and accessibility, which has resulted in employees ignoring, stigmatizing, and antagonizing disabled audiences (Collins et al., 2022; Ludwig, 2012). The combination of these economic, social, and physical barriers all coincides to influence their desire to attend and engage in the arts, as Ludwig (2012) states, "combined with other factors including low expectations, a previous negative experience with a particular organization, or even a general sense of disappointment when it comes to accessibility features, the effect on participation becomes apparent" (p. 146)

Stigma thus plays a large role in creating barriers to disabled people's participation in the arts, as these "are not only overt and visible, but also covert and invisible, highlighting the complexity in removing them, as they entail not only physical things but also attitudes that people hold." (Collins et al., 2022, p. 319). Garland-Thomson (2005) discusses how the stigma is invoked through staring, as a reflection of larger societal ideologies and cultural views towards non-normative bodies. As evidenced by early freak shows, public staring upholds the able-bodied status quo, and functions to determine disabled people's place when in public spaces. Those with non-visible disabilities experience micro-aggressions in public spaces, particularly when requesting accommodations, because lacking physical signs for their condition can lead to accusations of lies (Kattari et al., 2018). Wendell (2001) touches upon the notion of "passing" for disabled people, noting how the suspicions of whether one is *really* disabled can come from strangers, loved ones, and of disabled persons repeatedly proving their disability (Roman, 2009). These suspicions tend to be held towards people with invisible disabilities who cannot readily point to a physical marker to prove their disability. Their intentions are interpreted as dubious because they are viewed as seeking to take advantage of others for attention or "special treatment" (Wendell, 2001). Kattari et al. (2018) writes that stigmatizing attitudes places pressure on disabled people to educate people while already attending to the draining work of having to advocate for themselves. Overall, these different types of barriers will be referenced in later chapters when examining the research participants' experiences with (in)accessibility in Peterborough-Nogojiwanong, contrasting these with the literature.

2.4.2 *Types of Access*

For Watkin (2017), an accessible, inclusive environment "requires the space to be thoughtfully designed to support all of the abilities of the people who work in and visit it." (p. 103). Cultural access practices need to be considered beyond the immediate show, because factors such as accessible bathrooms, public transportation, information guides, and box-office features can all influence whether people with disabilities feel comfortable and are willing to attend (Watkin, 2017). The able-bodied populace for whom these spaces are designed for are unable to recognize and account for the labour that goes into finding and navigating accessible spaces, as it is time-consuming, draining, and overwhelming (Hamraie, 2016). Arts spaces need to cultivate a sense of belonging for people with disabilities to make them feel comfortable as audience members, as La Rose et al. (2022) states “access to must precede engagement in the arts.” (p. 8).

Gratton’s (2020) article further identifies the importance in distinguishing between physical access and emotional access. Physical access entails environmental features, such as ramps and accessible washrooms, while emotional access refers to their safety and comfortability within these spaces, whether disabled people are protected from harassment and bullying. Emotional access can be improved through organizers implementing disability awareness and sensitivity training, to ensure that the arts are a welcoming space wherein disabled people can experience a sense of belonging (Gratton, 2020).

TechnoAccess is another type of access which centers disabled and aging perspectives, building accessible technologies to encourage “development of access-first technology creation processes from the ground up” as opposed to reactive physical accommodations (Temple Jones et al., 2021, p. 2). Arts-based practices like digital storytelling have empowered people with disabilities to determine their own narratives through technological platforms, with the purpose being to help create social change through delving into their experience with discrimination and prejudice (Chandler et al., 2018). While there are still economic and cognitive obstacles hindering marginalized groups’ ability to engage with technology (La Rose et al., 2022), TechnoAccess nevertheless serves as a potential way to reduce barriers to arts for people who are socially and structurally blocked from participating in artistic events and opportunities (Temple Jones et al., 2021).

These are thus ways access can be experienced through a variety of in-person and virtual platforms, which will be compared and contrasted to the participants’ encounters with local venues in the discussion of the findings. More specific approaches will be discussed in the section below.

2.4.3 *Recent Interventions: Open Access, Access Intimacy, and Relaxed Performance*

Recent literature critiques conventional "checklist" approaches towards access, as these are geared towards implementing predetermined accommodations, while failing to properly consult with the disabled audiences they are attempting to engage (Papalia, 2018). As Hamraie (2016) states, “when accessibility becomes a matter of thinking for disabled people by presuming access needs and building them into rigid structures, it becomes another standardized, one-size-fits-all practice that excludes those who are unanticipated or illegible.” (p. 265). Fritsch (2013) views accommodations as quick fixes and alternative solutions, designating people with disabilities as inherently different to the standard able-bodied norm. Hamraie (2016) further critiques the practice of accommodations for placing the onus on disabled people to seek access rather than on non-disabled people to help create access. As Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018) writes, “access is a guilt-ridden afterthought, when it’s thought of at all, and it’s usually only thought of when disabled people ask about accessibility” (p. 61).

The literature shows that *meaningful access practices* require a far more communicative, integrative, sustained dialogue with disabled communities, as Hamraie (2016) writes, “meaningful access, then, is relational accountability. It materializes from a commitment to enact, iterate, and re-iterate our answer to the questions of who belongs, where, and how.” (p. 265). Watkin (2017) views this as a holistic process, wherein disabled people are consulted throughout the various stages of planning, designing, marketing, and performing an arts piece. A meaningful access practice questions how power is being distributed when decisions for disabled people are being made and resists a top-down approach which avoids proper communication with the communities it is striving to be accountable to.

Papalia (2018) coined the methodological framework Open Access to reconceptualize access as an encompassing communicative process which strives to challenge normative power structures, rather than as a reactive response to disabling physical environments. Open Access is determined within collaborative mutual relationships, which prioritizes the desire to understand disabled people's individual and unique needs. Rather than assigning these responsibilities to institutions, it gives power and agency to "the people who hold knowledge about support and accessibility […] who are practicing accessibility all of the time" (para. 16). Showcasing how people with disabilities are valued members within arts communities through sustained dialogue which centers their perspectives (rather than tokenizing or overlooking them) is vital to their participation in the arts (Gratton, 2020). Through doing so, "access intimacy" - the gratification and satisfaction one feels upon having their access needs acknowledged and validated - can be achieved within these relationships (Mingus, 2011). Creating these intimate connections allows people with disabilities to feel a sense of security and belonging through building meaningful relationships within a community, because it provides them with a space in which they can disclose deeply personal experiences and concerns with those who will value and validate them (Mingus, 2011).

Relaxed performance can be viewed as process created through Open Access principles (Rice et al., 2021), because it resists conventional expectations for audiences, allowing them to care for their immediate needs while watching an arts piece. While conventional theatre practices would view these actions as rude and disruptive, relaxed performance emphasizes the importance in allowing people to attend to their physical, emotional, and sensory needs. Other features include “dimmer lighting and lowered sound, a pre-show talk to explain what will happen and on-going consultation with disabled people to make sure everyone feels welcome.” (Rice & Besse, 2020, para. 6). LaMarre et al. (2021) view relaxed performance as challenging fixed checklist accommodations, because access is approached as an ongoing dialogue among organizers, artists, and audiences, and centers disabled people's perspectives and experiences, to envision how radical change can be achieved for all bodies. These concepts – which I have included to create a working understanding of meaningful accessibility - will be further reflected upon and explored later in the analysis of the interview findings.

In striving to better understand the practices which increase disabled people’s access to the arts, there is an importance in exploring the terms and designs that have been created to improve upon conventional approaches to accessibility. Since each disability is unique and can change over time and space, access practices should be developed with an appreciation for the nuances within people’s lived experiences. The upcoming section will provide an overview of the economic and political history of Peterborough-Nogojiwanong, and how it has led to and shaped the current artistic spaces that will be explored throughout the research process.

2.5 *Local Arts*

White Europeans migrated to Nogojiwanong in the 1700s and settled upon the lands Indigenous nations had cultivated for centuries (Simpson, 2012). Through treaties, settler groups were able to claim colonial ownership over Nogojiwanong, using the resources derived from the land (retitled as "Peterborough") to manufacture industrial capital (Bain and McLean, 2013), and in doing so, destroyed many of the crops, animals, and waters Indigenous peoples depended on for sustenance (Simpson, 2012). The local economy was increased through mechanical and natural industries, with railways and canals incentivizing larger corporations to build work factories, while a boom in leisure businesses grew commercial activities in the Kawartha regions. Nearly a century later, these industries began to buckle, and Peterborough's once thriving economy slowly became depressed through a steep financial decline. The local government then looked towards local arts sectors to improve Peterborough's poor economic state (Bain and McLean, 2013).

Bain and McLean’s (2013) article *From Post to Poster to Post-Industrial: Cultural Networks and Eclectic Creative Practice in Peterborough and Thunder Bay, Ontario*, explores the socio-political history of Peterborough arts sectors. Their article details the local arts’ political roots, for which the authors showcase how the arts have been utilized to advocate for social and economic change within the formerly industrial city, and to create opportunities for more inclusive practices and policies to strengthen community solidarity. The local arts scene in Peterborough was described by Bain and McLean (2013) as "inclusive, informal, and built upon many collaborative and multi-disciplinary approaches" with "communities composed of many overlapping communities." (p. 116). These communities extend to live performance, which includes theatre, dance, poetry, visual arts, and music arts (EC3, 2020). Peterborough is home to many long-standing museums, such as the municipal Art Gallery of Peterborough, Peterborough Museum and Archives, and The Canoe Museum (City of Peterborough, 2012). It is also home to Artspace, which opened in 1974 as the first artist-run centre and is notable for creating a space to combine the arts with politics, through launching an open debate for local politicians to discuss their intended policies on arts and culture (Bain & McLean, 2013). Peterborough features numerous theatre companies, including The Theatre on King, Mysterious Entity, the Peterborough Theatre Guild, and New Stages Theatre Company (City of Peterborough, 2012; Welcome Peterborough, n.d.). It also offers spaces for organizations to stage programs and events through cafes and restaurants (Welcome Peterborough, n.d.), as well as bigger venues like the Showplace Performance Centre (Welcome Peterborough, n.d.), and Market Hall Performing Arts Centre, which also produces artists residencies and the long-running interdisciplinary program Alternating Currents (Public Energy, 2021). These diverse artistic communities are further bridged together through sponsored public events like the 10-day long festival Artsweek, which features various art projects within disciplines such as music, puppetry, theatre (Artsweek, 2018), as well as festivals like the month-long Precarious festival (Theatre on King, n.d.), the experimental show Emergency (Public Energy, 2021), the ReFrame Film Festival (Welcome Peterborough, n.d.), and the monthly First Friday Art Crawl (Abrahamse, 2021). While this list includes many current programs and events, it is not exhaustive, as the arts are consistently growing and developing.

The local arts serve to enrich residents' lives through offering a range of artistic opportunities, whether one desires to attend a show or become involved in a production themselves. As Bain and McLean (2013) write, because Peterborough is a mid-size city, the local arts sector is far more welcoming to newcomers when compared to larger, bustling cities like Toronto, as Peterborough provides both audiences and artists a “lower barrier to cultural sector participation, affordable material and supportive psychological space to experiment with new skills, and access [to] informal networks and mentors” (p. 115).

Local arts organizations have also established their desire to engage in socially conscious arts-based practices, in both the content and production of their pieces. Access is a vital component for local curators, which has led production companies to increasingly incorporate the use of more innovative access practices over the past five years. In 2018, the local theatre company Mysterious Entity incorporated relaxed performance into one of their productions, a decision which received positive audience responses (LaMarre et al., 2019). Relaxed performance is an alternative arts-based practice that strives to challenge normative (able-bodied) theatre etiquette through integrating "relaxed" features into these spaces, for audiences, organizers, and performers, such as walking, eating, drinking, or taking a break and stepping away from the space entirely during a performance (Temple Jones et al., 2022). Two years later, The Chemical Valley Project also incorporated relaxed performance features into their show, becoming the first show in Peterborough to facilitate the use of live ASL reading, with ASL interpreters placed on-stage to deliver the production to Deaf and low hearing audience members (Woodcock, 2020). Organizations such as Public Energy have also recently created the position for an Accessibility Coordinator specifically to prioritize accessibility for audiences within arts events (Public Energy, n.d.). These examples demonstrate local organizations' desire to strengthen their access practices to help to engage disabled audiences in the arts safely and comfortably.

Furthermore, because arts engagement is shown to improve people's mental health and emotional wellbeing, there is an importance in ensuring that the arts are accessible to people with disabilities (Gillam, 2018). According to Statistics Canada (2019), people with disabilities account for one-third of the Peterborough populace, which comprises a large portion of the people who may be interested in participating in or attending arts events. Currier's (2018) study shows that a significant portion of local artists also identify as living with either a mental or physical disability, and as depending on ODSP. The research also revealed that access is a critical concern for local residents who are involved in arts communities, as the participants listed physical and social access as a recurring problem which hinders their engagement with spaces and events (Currier, 2018). There is an importance in keeping the arts accessible for people with disabilities because it can serve as an extra source of income and a therapeutic outlet with which to channel their experiences with discrimination and prejudice into (Bang & Kim, 2015). It is crucial to explore what disabled people's access needs are and whether they are being recognized and responded to within Peterborough-Nogojiwanong.

The local arts hold a deep cultural and political richness, reaffirming their overall importance within the community. In their attempts to introduce alternative practices such as relaxed performance, arts organizations and facilitators have shown their own commitment to making spaces more accessible to people with non-normative body-minds in recent years, though these efforts would later be suspended due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The upcoming section will thus focus on the impacts COVID-19 had on mainstream arts sectors, the specific ways people with disabilities were affected by the virus, and how crucial disability culture was to maintaining connections and engagement during isolation.

2.6 *COVID-19, the Arts, and Disability Culture*

In 2020, the SARS-CoV-2 virus, referred to as “Coronavirus”, led to the outbreak of the COVID-19 global pandemic. The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that of the 600,000,000 known cases, the COVID-19 virus has contributed to over 6,500,000 deaths worldwide. In Canada, there have been approximately over 4,000,000 cases, resulting in upwards of 43,000 deaths over the past three years alone (WHO, 2022). The symptoms can range between common cold-like conditions, such as coughing, fatigue, runny nose, reduced smell and/or taste, and physical aches, to far more severe symptoms, like difficulties with breathing and chest pains (CDC, 2022). Due to COVID-19's highly contagious and transmissible nature, “stay home, save lives” was a slogan which emerged in the beginning of the pandemic to encourage people to remain in their homes to avoid the spread of the virus (Goggin & Ellis, 2020, p. 169). Governments worldwide implemented emergency public health measures to help reduce the spread of the virus and preserve the resources of health care systems, mandating physical distancing regulations, face masks, and lockdown restrictions (Grunawalt, 2021; Jeannotte, 2021).

Through enforcing these preventative measures, the Ontario government also imposed multiple provincial lockdowns, which forced universities, workplaces, and businesses to temporarily close, with the goal of keeping people isolated within their own homes (Nielson, 2020). However, the impacts of these public restrictions led to widescale job losses for those who are employed or receive a portion of their income through the arts (Jeannotte, 2021). Statistics gathered through EC3 (2020) show that Peterborough's arts sectors were also economically impacted through the public health crisis, because their profits were primarily generated through in-person shows. Artists, organizations, and companies experienced a massive financial toll due to lockdown measures, forced closures, and reduced capacity limits. Many struggled to survive while grappling with permanent venue closures and job loss, particularly for those who depend on live performance for their main income (EC3, 2020). As research shows that people with disabilities comprise a sizable portion of local artists (Currier, 2018) and are a group who are likely to rely on the arts for an extra source of income (Bang & Kim, 2015), it is possible that these restrictions were even more financially devastating for disabled populations in Peterborough.

When compared to pandemics which occurred before, Jeannotte (2021) notes how during public health restrictions digital technologies could be accessed to share information to public bodies, maintain relationships, and to engage in leisure through online events and activities. In response to these restrictions, practices which are based within disability culture were integrated into mainstream culture to help arts organizations rebound from the pandemic's economic impacts (Rice et al., 2021). Artists and arts organizations made their content accessible to audiences through online video platforms, allowing people to watch theatre plays and concerts, and to participate in digital visits to museums and galleries (Jeannotte, 2021), including through social media websites like Facebook and Instagram (Jeannotte, 2021; Saint-Raymond, 2021). Online video programs, such as Zoom and Skype, provided advantages for people with disabilities, as it gave them the choice to structure how they could experience and engage with an event through a virtual space (Rice et al., 2021). These programs offered alternative communication technologies to provide verbal cues for disabled audience members, as well as ASL interpretations and live transcriptions. Online platforming also allowed people to attend to themselves and their needs during a show, whether that be walking, eating, or leaving the space (Rice et al., 2021). The collective demand for arts organizations to preserve and hold events through online spaces during such a tumultuous time showcases how vital the arts are to the collective health and wellbeing, as Jeannotte (2021) writes, “it was evident that those working in the creative sector were providing what many viewed as an essential service, almost as important as those provided by the health care, the food production and food retail industries.” (p. 1).

However, criticisms have also been made regarding technical problems, as glitches, poor lighting, and poor audio interfered with disabled people's experiences with virtual programs. For example, Kersten-Parrish (2021), a Deaf woman who relies on lip reading, reported that closed captions were often riddled with delays, misspelling, and incorrect translations, while the people responsible for writing the transcripts would become distracted and stop midway. Aydos et al. (2021) detailed how an autistic person would become easily triggered and overstimulated through the surveillance of Skype cameras. La Rose et al. (2022) also described how people with cognitive disabilities would become overwhelmed with numerous windows/pop-ups when attempting to navigate online programs. For people who are low-income or on a fixed income, the technologies required to participate in online arts, such as computer devices, application software, and high-speed internet services, posed another barrier for them as they were simply economically unattainable (La Rose et al., 2022).

While disability culture was drawn upon to allow people to remain connected to their communities and engaged with the arts, it should be noted that prior to pandemic, disabled people were regularly denied the very accommodations that would later become normalized once able-bodied people needed to remain at home to avoid contracting a life-threatening illness (Aydos et al., 2021; Kersten-Parrish, 2021). Doonan (2021) views disabled people as possessing instructive sources of political wisdom based within their experiences of understanding their limitations and valuing their bodies. As Goggin & Ellis (2020) note, people with disabilities had long been staying home to avoid sickness, whether by choice or necessity, and were already accustomed to participating in society through digital avenues. Health practices which were encouraged during the pandemic, like mask-wearing and extensive handwashing and sanitizing, were already being regularly incorporated into disabled and immunocompromised people’s daily routines before able-bodied populations even began to contemplate mandating these (Doonan, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic showcased that these radical changes are possible because institutions and organizations utilized the knowledges which come from disability culture to make society more accessible to all bodies (Rice et al., 2021).

Furthermore, people with disabilities had an increased incentive to access the arts remotely because they are far more vulnerable to severe sickness and death upon contracting

COVID-19 (Doonan, 2021; Rice et al., 2021), and experience far more health-related anxieties than able-bodied people, particularly for those who have physical disabilities (Gignac et al., 2021) and/or are immunocompromised (Doonan, 2021). Along with black persons, Indigenous persons, people of colour, and aging populations, disabled people were among those who experienced the largest health and financial impacts during the pandemic (Grunawalt, 2021). For example, Canadians who relied on ODSP were denied increased financial help through CERB, even though the program was designed to help individuals recover from the pandemic's economic impacts (Rice et al., 2021). Those working in sales, hospitality, and service sectors experienced more financial difficulties and higher rates of stress, which overlaps with people with disabilities because they are more likely to be employed in low-wage, precarious jobs than their non-disabled counterparts (Gignac, 2021). In public spaces, many disabled people were ostracized socially when attempting to request mask accommodations (Capurri, 2022), as certain groups, like autistic and epileptic people, could not physically wear face masks due to health concerns (Grunawalt, 2021). Able-bodied people would falsely claim to be disabled to avoid masking themselves, using fake status cards to receive special accommodations in commercial areas, further raising suspicions towards disabled people for "faking" their conditions (Grunawalt, 2021). As COVID-19 led to increased vulnerabilities for disabled people, biologically, economically, socially, the pandemic further demonstrated the critical need for improved access.

The pandemic also gave rise to anti-mask politics, a conspiracy group which denies the existence of COVID-19 while also undermining and resisting the public health measures designed to reduce the spread of the virus, such as masking, lockdowns, and vaccines (Grunawalt, 2021). Anti-mask rhetoric can be viewed as standing in opposition to disability culture, because rather than making small inconveniences to ensure the protection of vulnerable persons, it demands that vulnerable persons are exposed to these risks to engage in social activities (Grunawalt, 2021). Their views are emblematic of larger societal attitudes that view people with disabilities having less value, for which disabled loss of life is inevitable (Rice et al., 2021). However, as Rice et al. (2021) write, pre-pandemic normalcy was never physically, emotionally, or economically accessible to people with disabilities; it only served to isolate them further to the margins of an inaccessible society.

The arts can be utilized to envision how communities can come together and make changes to create better access for people with disabilities, which able-bodied people can benefit from too. The pandemic showcased how the access practices utilized within disability culture can be integrated into mainstream society, through recognizing “disability and difference as part of life, as basic to the story of humanity, as a site of creativity and culture-making, and as something with which everyone has a relationship” (Rice et al., 2021, para. 3).

COVID-19 had disastrous implications for the greater populace, and it highlighted the unique vulnerabilities marginalized groups face in their daily lives. The practices disabled people developed in response to these disparities can thus be integrated into mainstream culture to increase inclusion and access for all bodies. These conditions further situate the contexts the thesis is seeking to explore through better understanding the impacts the pandemic had – and may be continuing to have - on disabled communities who engage with Peterborough-Nogojiwanong’s arts sectors, which will further be examined in the analysis and discussion chapters.

2.7 *Contributions to the Literature*

Through outlining these different pieces of literature, I am seeking to contribute to the scholarship in utilizing a critical disability perspective to explore meaningful accessibility, as I strive to highlight and critique the role of neoliberal institutions in obstructing access and (re)producing barriers for people with non-normative body-minds. I am coming to the research with an affirmative understanding of disability, in viewing it as a lived identity which can be the source of enriching and valuable contributions to the arts (Swain & French, 2000). There is thus an importance in critiquing institutions and institutional ideologies which may be hindering disabled people’s participation in the arts as these can rely upon a narrow understanding of both disability and accessibility (Fritsch, 2013; Goodley & Lawthom, 2019). Furthermore, I am seeking to contribute to the literature through utilizing Open Access as one of my methodological approaches, grounding my working knowledge of arts-based accessibility within that framework (Papalia, 2018). While the Open Access framework has been referenced by scholars (Rice et al., 2021), I am seeking to expand upon the concept through providing disabled people’s perspectives with the unique use of the conceptual framework of Open Access.

The research also holds significance because no studies have been done exploring access to the arts within the geographic location of Peterborough-Nogojiwanong. *The Local Arts* sought to showcase the rich and diverse legacies the local arts scene has (Bain & McLean, 2013), which was invertedly impacted through the COVID-19 pandemic (EC3, 2020). These contexts have provided opportunities to explore what meaningful access practices look like and how these can be enacted as a means of giving back and expressing appreciation for those artistic legacies. I strive to enhance these communities through listening to the diverse perspectives of those who may have experienced barriers when attempting to navigate these spaces, to allow more people to engage with and participate in these dynamic worlds.

2.8 *Conclusion*

In the *Literature Review*, I aspired to provide a comprehensive overview of the scholarship that informed my own research on accessibility. The four research questions I am seeking to answer through the thesis are: 1) How do people with disabilities define "access", 2) from the perspectives of the participants, are there barriers in access to the local arts, 3) has COVID-19 impacted access to the arts in Peterborough, and if so, how, and 4) how do participant perceptions of access compare with the standards outlined in the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act*?

As explored in the section on the local arts, Peterborough-Nogojiwanong contains a rich diversity of artistic sectors, including dance, theatre, poetry, and visual arts. These sectors have grown from the city's early industrial roots and developed as a space for progressive political, social, and economic change. More recently, organizations became invested in expanding accessibility for local audiences, experimenting with practices such as relaxed performance and ASL interpreters. However, the COVID-19 pandemic placed a temporary hold on disability progress, as the virus – and the resulting government mandates – prevented arts facilitators from having audiences for live performances for health and safety concerns. Though in-person arts were suspended for a period, the pandemic led to a greater participation in disability culture, as events were placed online through digital platforms, bringing people together while audience members could remain in the comfort of their own homes. The pandemic therefore opened enriching opportunities to explore new and alternative ways that accessibility can be practiced through technological possibilities to better engage people with disabilities in the arts.

I am pursuing the research to contribute to the literature on meaningful access practices. I seek to center my analysis within a critical disability studies lens to expand upon limited definitions of “disability” and better understand how non-normativity is embodied and experienced in everyday life, and to retain a critical focus on the role neoliberalism plays in influencing institutional approaches towards accessibility with regards to mandates like the AODA, as these ideologies may also be influencing local organizations' current access practices. In the next chapter, I will explore the methodologies I utilized to guide the research process to provide an overview of the how I developed the research goals and questions, as well as the design I chose for sampling and analytical components of the thesis.

Chapter 3 Methodology

In this *Methodology* chapter, I will explore how I determined and developed the design of my research methods through the following sections: *Coming to the Research Questions* discusses the lived experiences which led to my four research questions, *Methodological Approaches* examines the two methodologies I used to guide the thesis, critical disability theory and Open Access, followed by the *Ethics Board Review*, which explores the Ethics Application I was required to submit to work with human participants. Then I will discuss the research process, outlining *The Participants* I gathered for one-on-one interviews, the twelve *Interview Questions* I created, as well as the methods I utilized for *Interviewing People with Disabilities*. Afterwards, I will cover the *Data Analysis*, outlining the practices I relied upon to scrutinize the findings with regards to thematic analysis. Finally, the *Document Analysis* I conducted on the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* (AODA) comparing the participants' views on accessibility to the Act's mandate will be briefly described, as well as the *Working Premises* I brought to the research process as white, disabled settler woman living on an occupied territory.

3.1 *Coming to the Research Questions*

I come to the research with a deeply personal relationship to disability and the arts, one which shapes my principles, interests, and goals, in both academic and non-academic endeavors. Since I was a young, I have lived with a disability, called Erb's Palsy, as a result of a birthing injury caused by medical malpractice. Erb's Palsy impacts my left arm, extending throughout my shoulder, to my wrist, and down to my fingers. I experience chronic pain, reduced strength, and a limited range of motion. As such, I do nearly all my everyday tasks one-handed and use my disabled arm as a source of physical support.

While I was raised to think of myself as no less capable than anybody else, I began to recognize that I was inherently different from other people at a very young age. Growing up, I faced bullying in school from my peers, who would mimic me, stare, make rude comments, and ask invasive, intrusive questions. I internalized the shame I experienced as someone who lived with a visible, marked difference in unhealthy ways. When I was a teenager, I struggled with low self-esteem and mental illness, as I viewed my body as ugly and wrong. I wanted nothing more than to be like other girls, and because I could never be, I made the conscious choice to become invisible, hiding my disability through certain clothes and posturing, with the hope of passing as able-bodied to avoid being centered out or mocked for my physical appearance. Through making myself quietly meek and passive, I was able to hide from the world for a long time, and because I believed that hiding was safe and comfortable, I was able to dismiss how confining, depressing, and isolating it truly was.

Then in my early twenties, I began to sense a building unease and agitation bubbling inside me. I craved something more, as the static and fixed nature of my life was slowly becoming suffocating. Although I was doing well academically, I had no friends, hobbies, or interests. I knew that something needed to change, and so I made the choice to purchase a camera to begin pursuing photography in 2019. My photos then caught the attention of Wes Ryan, a neurodivergent local artist who lives with a brain injury, who asked me to take promotional shots for their show Turtle. My interest in the arts blossomed from there, and I met other artists with disabilities who, like Wes, made their non-normative body-minds a central point of their work. During this period, I also ran a photo series titled Fragmented where I placed a spotlight on disabled artists' relationship with their creative endeavors, though the series was short-lived.

Later that year, in September I performed for a show directed and choreographed by Wes Ryan titled *The Clarity of Brightness,* based on the poems of local writer PJ Thomas. The show's core themes revolved around living with mental illness and featured a cast of performers with various types of disabilities. The experience of performing in front of an audience was deeply empowering and radically transformative. For so long, I had been petrified of the idea of doing anything physical that would call attention to my disability. I was convinced that people wouldn't see me, but would instead be fixated on my physical difference, my “abnormality”, my “deformity". *The Clarity of Brightness* completely changed who I was and what I wanted to do, because I learned that my disability was a special characteristic that could bring something unique and valuable to the arts. To make up for a lifetime of hiding, I decided that I needed to explore every performance-based art I possibly could in order to be seen and immersed myself in the local poetry, photography, theatre, and dance scenes.

The local arts had such a deeply transformative impact on me to the extent that I wanted to ensure these opportunities were available for all persons with disabilities living in Peterborough-Nogojiwanong. However, when *The Clarity of Brightness* cast was asked to perform the show as part of the First Friday Art Crawl in early September, I became aware that access continues to be a barrier. While I was excited to participate in the performance, I quickly realized that many of the cast members were unable to access the Art Crawl themselves, as several of the selected buildings the Crawl was being held in were physically inaccessible to wheelchair users. Two months later, in November, I wrote an article titled *The Tragedy of the Art Crawl* for the (now defunct) Electric City Magazine (Scott, 2019). The article featured quotes from disabled people regarding their encounters with local inaccessible spaces, and I utilized their experiences to showcase the need to improve access practices, as well as to advocate for more government-mandated resources to implement structural accommodations.

The experiences I had throughout 2019 demonstrated the importance in creating further dialogue to discuss matters related to local accessibility, barriers, identity, and disability. Local access practices appeared to be an ample research opportunity, as I could merge the two topics I had a long-vested interest in – arts and disability – into a potential M.A. thesis. From there, I began to brainstorm ways that I could pursue research to create meaningful social change for people with disabilities in Peterborough-Nogojiwanong.

I proposed the topic for the thesis in early 2020, a few weeks prior to the global outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. I initially resisted the idea of including the pandemic into the research on access, primarily due to my own pandemic-induced fatigue, as several theatre, dance, and poetry projects I was involved in were cancelled as lockdown measures suspended arts events to prevent the spread of the virus. However, I realized that not only would the pandemic be unavoidable when discussing current accessibility measures, it provided an incredible opportunity to explore how access measures were implemented and impacted over the past two years, as the cultural shift to hold arts events through online platforms could offer unique advantages and/or disadvantages for people with disabilities. The pandemic allows us to reimagine how accessibility can be practiced in inventive ways, rather than through conventional checklist approaches.

These factors all led me to the four research questions: 1) How do people with disabilities define “access”, 2) from the perspectives of the participants, are there barriers in access to the local arts, 3) has COVID-19 impacted access to the arts in Peterborough, and if so, how, and 4)

How do participant perceptions of access compare with the standards outlined in the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act*?

3.2 *Methodological Approaches*

In deciding on methodological approach to guide the thesis, I wanted to utilize a framework that would challenge conventional expectations and standards for disability and access. The two methodological approaches I decided to use within the research are Open Access and critical disability theory.

Created by disabled artist Carmen Papalia (2018), Open Access operates through five main tenets: meaningful and sustained communication between all invested parties to understand one's unique needs; an understanding that everyone is the expert of their own experiences and knowledge; recognizing and centering embodied learning; viewing all (normative and non-normative) bodies and minds as simply existing on an interconnected and interdependent spectrum of being; and, functioning as a safe space in which people can communicate with each other with respectfulness and compassion, and one that evolves through these exchanges. Open Access reconceptualizes access as a continuous communicative process, wherein the desire to understand and respond to people's individual needs are the basis of these relationships. It strives to challenge normative power structures, rather than operate as a reactive response to disabling physical environments (Papalia, 2018). Open Access beckons us to question how policy-oriented approaches to access uphold power dynamics, as well as who these policies frame as knowledge-holders.

Papalia's (2018) framework emphasizes the need for person-to-person engagement within an existing community, as well as the importance in maintaining these relationships as networks for support and care. Viewing access as more than an organizational response to barriers within structural environments allows us to understand disabled people’s individual perspectives and experiences with access in far more attentive and encompassing manners. Open Access helps to challenge reductive neoliberal approaches through re-envisioning these practices as most effective when enacted through the work of communities. As Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018) writes, access is an expression of love within a community "when we strategize to create cross-disability access spaces. When we refuse to abandon each other. When we, as disabled people, fight for the access needs of sibling crips." (p. 32). Through making the arts accessible to all body-minds, we showcase that each individual nuance is worthy of belonging to a community and taking space.

The second methodology I will be utilizing is critical disability theory, a framework which implores researchers to question their own role in knowledge-making. As Goodley et al. (2019) notes, critical disability theory seeks "to ask of scholars engaged with disability: why are you here?" (p. 181). A critical disability theory lens is needed because it demands that scholars be accountable for their role and to recognize the power dynamics that are rooted within the research process, particularly when engaged in qualitative methods. Critical disability theory requires me to be reflexive with regards to the power I have over the research participants and to question my own goals and intentions for the findings along each stage of knowledge-making.

Furthermore, for the thesis, I am seeking to explore the visible and invisible barriers which may be preventing people with disabilities from having full participation within the local arts. I view "disability" as an umbrella term which includes a range of impairments, conditions, and illnesses, and I am seeking to challenge the institutionalized categorization of disability, because it has historically worked to marginalize and disempower people socially, politically, and economically, as discussed in the previous chapter detailing critical disability studies. Critical disability theory would be advantageous for the thesis because it is rooted in critiquing the neoliberal ideologies that produce institutional definitions for who is considered “disabled enough” to receive economic benefits, which not only denies disabled people’s own struggles with their body-minds (through pain, fatigue, etc.), but also serves to reinforce the idea that disabled people can only participate in society if they are able to achieve able-bodiedness (or as much as possible) (Goodley et al., 2019). I believe critical disability theory will help to strengthen my analysis of the findings, particularly when exploring the AODA and the health and safety measures surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic.

Critical disability theory also examines the ways that power operates to code certain groups of people as disabled based on their non-normative features, as well as the impacts these socially and culturally embedded constructions have on marginalized communities (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). Schalk (2017) and Minich (2016) emphasize how institutions have previously weaponized "disability" to code racialized groups as inferior, while also making their communities more vulnerable to acquiring disabilities through poverty, environmental racism, and systemic violence. The impacts have led to Indigenous people, black people, and persons of colour lacking access to the social, cultural, and economic privileges and rights white settlers have. As I have the position of being a white settler academic, critical disability theory is therefore important to utilize in the research because black people, Indigenous people, and people of colour may have much different conceptions of what meaningful access practices are and how these can be achieved when compared to white settlers. For example, while a non-Indigenous white disabled person may see access as a space that is free from physical barriers such as stairs, an Indigenous person may view access as a space which prioritizes Indigenous peoples' safety and comfortability through recognizing and accounting for Canada's colonial legacies. As Changfoot (2021) writes, organizations and facilitators need to re-conceptualize accessibility through a decolonial framework to make these environments comfortable for Indigenous peoples. For example, addressing and accounting for Canada's previous colonial harms and ongoing structural violence towards their communities helps to recognize the physical, economic, and social realities they continue to face. There is also an importance in prioritizing Indigeneity within the arts through representing and consulting with Indigenous knowledge holders, because tokenizing their presence can exacerbate anxieties for experiencing discrimination, prejudice, and alienation when entering settler-led spaces (Changfoot et al., 2022). Conceptualizing meaningful access practices thus requires me to be accountable for how racism and settler-colonial violence shape these perceptions, rather than reproducing the Western medical model in limiting my analysis to those who have been officially diagnosed with a disability by a medical practitioner.

3.3 *Ethics Board Review*

To work with human participants, I submitted my Ethics Application to the Trent Research Ethics Board (Ethics Board Review) to ensure that the research design I was intending to pursue was ethical and safe. As I was planning on interviewing people with disabilities – who are recognized as a vulnerable group – I needed to follow the proper steps to minimize the potential to harm and/or re-traumatize the participants.

The two initial sampling methods I designed to recruit participants were convenience sampling and snowball sampling. Convenience sampling involves gathering participants based on their spatial and temporal convenience, oftentimes due to their proximity to the researcher’s physical location (VanderStoep & Johnston, 2009). Convenience sampling has been used in previous studies (Cook & Cook, 2017; Kattari et al., 2018; Ludwig, 2012) because people with disabilities are a hard-to-reach population. It typically requires those who are interested in participating to contact the researcher to become involved in the interview process (provided they are eligible) upon the researcher advertising their study. In snowball sampling, the researcher relies on the existing participants to contact other people within that population who may be interested in participating to cultivate their sample, which then "begins to build on itself and increase in size." (VanderStoep & Johnston, 2009, p. 27) The snowball method has been sampled in previous studies exploring disability and the arts (Collins et al., 2021; Solvang, 2012, Viscardis et al., 2019), particularly because people with disabilities are a distinctly vulnerable group, which creates more difficulties gathering people to participate.

Convenience sampling would allow me to place posters around Trent University and downtown Peterborough locations, to provide information on the study to onlookers, which enabled those who were interested in participating to contact me. Through snowball sampling I could contact local organizations to ask them to share information on the study to those within their own organization and to other organizations, which was advantageous because it was more likely to guarantee participants who were engaged in the arts. While I contacted eight organizations who are affiliated with the arts, only two organizations, Public Energy and The Theatre on King, responded to my email and shared the recruitment poster (along with basic information on the research) through their social media and monthly newsletters, respectively. Snowball sampling would further allow me to ask the participants to pass along the information to people they knew who would be interested in and eligible for participation.

However, it later occurred to me that I could utilize the connections within the arts community to access participants through my social networks, a method that would be far more reliable and quicker. I chose to incorporate a purposive sampling method to recruit people with disabilities with whom I had a prior relationship to through the local arts, such as the cast members who performed in *The Clarity of Brightness*. For purposive sampling, the researcher(s) will reach out to specific people who they believe meet the characteristics required to be included in the sample (VanderStoep & Johnston, 2009). A purposeful method has been used to help the researcher(s) reach out to marginalized groups for the purpose of increasing representation through selecting people with a range of different disabilities (Bang & Kim, 2015; La Rose et al., 2022; Viscardis et al., 2019) to "include equal representation of groups that may not be equally represented in society." (VanderStoep & Johnston, 2009, p. 187). As a researcher who occupies a position of power, building and sustaining these relationships with the participants requires trust and understanding, particularly because people with disabilities are a marginalized group. As a member of the disabled community, this type of sampling allowed me to access participants with whom I had already fostered a shared sense of empathy and understanding. While the power imbalances that are inherent to the dynamic between the researcher and the participants would still be present in the interview, I believed it would help the participants to know that the research was being led by someone who had lived experience with disability, rather than an able-bodied academic residing over the research from an outsider's perspective. I messaged other persons with disabilities that live in the Peterborough area with whom I was already in contact through Facebook with information on the study, asking them whether they would be interested in being interviewed. Fortunately, all the individuals I contacted were enthusiastic about the research and eager to participate, as they viewed the research as potentially empowering in providing a platform with which to express their own struggles with stigmatization and inaccessibility.

However, an initial problem that arose concerned the potential to re-traumatize the participants in asking questions regarding their experiences with barriers, belonging, and (in)accessibility. To minimize these risks, I provided them the option to skip any questions they were uncomfortable with, to pause the interviews, and to take breaks. I also stated that I would do check-ins during the interview, to allow them to control the space and assess their own needs and emotional wellbeing. There were also possible social/professional risks because I would be asking them to recollect their encounters with barriers to the local arts, which could lead to specific names, boards, and organizations being revealed. To reduce these harms, I allowed them the option to use a pseudonym in place of their name in the interview transcripts, and I stated that I would change all identifying information regarding venues, people, and organizations in the write-up and presentation of the thesis.

These potential harms were also connected to issues regarding the consent process. In seeking to gather a range of people with various types of disabilities, I would potentially be recruiting people with mental and intellectual disabilities, which opened concerns regarding their capacity to consent to be interviewed by the REB. To overcome these issues, the sampling design outlined that the onus would be placed on those who were interested in participating to contact the researcher themselves, to denote their agency and decision-making capacity. I further decided that I would verbally confirm their ability to consent in-person before commencing the interview, even for those who required the use of a guardian.

Another overarching problem was the matter of planning in-person meetings while amid the COVID-19 pandemic. I was required to comply with the guidelines outlined by both Trent University and the Ontario government during a period in which regulations and restrictions were undergoing conflicting and rapid changes. However, upholding and meeting these regulations was important for the research because disabled people are more vulnerable to facing severe illness and death upon contracting the virus, thus these standards and expectations needed to be enforced to protect their health and wellbeing (Doonan, 2021). These precautions were a source of tension within the ethics approval process because the Ontario government's guidelines were far laxer than the practices I wanted to enforce for the in-person interviews, such as three-layer masking for indoor spaces. After undergoing the revisions, it was determined that an in-person interview design which gave the participants the power to decide where the meeting would take place while also encouraging certain preventative practices, like meeting in an outdoor space, indoor masking, physical distancing, and sanitizing would be most suitable.

In allowing the participants to determine the meeting place, it also gave them the choice to decide upon a location that was comfortable and accessible to their needs, to provide them with greater autonomous control over any accommodations they required. For safety reasons, the location was required to be in a public space. The participants were also allowed to decide whether the interview would occur in-person or over Zoom/Skype.

The initial application was submitted to the REB on March 22, 2022. The requested revisions came back to me on May 16. I revised the application and re-submitted it on May 27. The second batch of revisions (which were few and minor) were sent to me on June 17. Upon making the changes, I was finally approved for research on July 28.

3.4 *The Participants*

It only took a few weeks to gather the participants, likely because I belonged to the disability and arts community, providing me with the social networks I required to reach the intended sample. While I planned to recruit between five to ten participants, I was able to gather ten participants in total by the end of October.

The participants' disabilities ranged between physical and mobility impairments, brain injuries, chronic pain and illness, mental illness, diabetes, autism, and blindness. I prioritized gathering participants with a range of various types of disabilities to explore the different and multi-faceted insights among disabled people. Many of the participants also identified as having more than one type of disability, with mental illness being the most common overlapping condition.

Despite the range of disabilities present in the sample, nearly all the participants expressed their hesitation or unease with labelling themselves as disabled, even while recognizing their own conditions as disabilities, with a few individuals speaking to their personal struggle with not feeling "disabled enough" to claim the term as an identity. However, the participants also criticized neoliberal structures for producing narrow and limited standards for who qualifies as being disabled. One participant criticized the inconsistencies within the AODA when recalling her experience searching for economic resources during chemotherapy, stating, “what I was going through was not considered a disability even though I couldn’t walk some days or move or do much of anything on my own.” A few participants nevertheless commented on how the interview was an empowering experience and helped them in reclaiming their personal identification as a disabled person.

In terms of demographics, six of the participants were male-identified while the remaining four were female-identified. Three of the participants also identified as queer. The youngest participant was in their mid-twenties, while the oldest was in their mid-sixties. Aside from three participants who were in their twenties, the overwhelming number of participants were above the age of thirty.

The chart below contains a brief description of each of the ten participants. It includes their age, disability or disabilities, their relationship to the arts, and any other identifying personal details they discussed in the interviews. All the information was disclosed on the record during their interview and contains nothing the participants explicitly asked to remain concealed or be removed from the transcripts.

Participant	**Description**
Patrick	Patrick is an avant-garde performance artist in his early forties. He has been performing in various bands since his late teens, experimenting with shock-value visuals and sounds. Patrick lives with adrenomyeloneuropathy, a spinal cord condition that affects his lower body, specifically impacting his mobility, for which the symptoms began manifesting in his late twenties.
Wes	Wes is a gender fluid, queer-identified artist in their mid-fifties. They have been practicing various types of art for over 15 years, specializing in theatre, dance, spoken word poetry, music, and visual arts. Wes is autistic and has lived with a traumatic brain injury since 2008. They have pursued projects independently and in collaboration with other local artists who live with disabilities. Wes' art explores topics pertaining to disability, sexuality, identity, poverty, trauma, and healing.
PJ	PJ Thomas is a local poet in her sixties. She has published two collections of poetry, *Undertow* and *Waves*, respectively, in addition to writing lyrics and short stories. PJ has lived with schizophrenia for over twenty years, which she characterizes as ranging between severe depression and delusions. PJ's work often references her mental illness, particularly her experience being

	institutionalized, and the systemic barriers limiting access to proper medical care.
Brad	Brad is a Toronto and Peterborough-based artist in his forties who specializes in theatre and puppetry. He experiences multiple disabilities, including tendinitis, diabetes, and chronic depression. Having acted in theatre productions for more than 10 years, Brad works in both comedy and drama genres, in addition to staging his own displays to showcase his puppetry creations.
Sam	A self-described theatre lover, Sam is a man in his mid-forties who has been faithfully attending Peterborough-based art productions for over 10 years, with a passion for theatre, dance, and music. He lives with blindness and has recently worked to become more comfortable disclosing his condition to others over the last few years. He strives to support the local arts community and help it rebound from the impacts of the pandemic.
Andrew	Andrew is in his mid-sixties and lives with severe depression. In his interview, he described his symptoms as manifesting through suicidal idealization, isolation, and alcoholic tendencies. Andrew more recently began to get involved in the local arts community, for which he engages in experimental projects through music and visual arts.
Lyah	Lyah is a lifelong local Peterborough resident in her twenties. She has lived with type 1 diabetes from a young age, which requires her to use insulin to regulate her blood sugar. Lyah gravitates towards the local music scene, as well as theatre. In her interview, she discussed how the pandemic increased her own health vulnerabilities, particularly upon the removal of the provincial mask mandates. She seeks to participate in the arts through attending events that enforce COVID-19 precautions.

Zoe	Zoe is a multidisciplinary artist and local actress in her thirties. A double breast cancer survivor, her condition resulted in her becoming immunocompromised, for which her immune system became more vulnerable during the pandemic. Since the early 2010s, she has starred various theatre productions, in addition to creating her own artwork to explore her experiences with her condition.
Micah	Micah is a queer-identified writer in his mid-twenties. Micah is autistic and experiences mental illness in the form of depression and anxiety. Having only recently moved to Peterborough over the past three years, he has devoted his own writing to exploring topics related to queerness and disability.
Pat	Pat is a local DJ in his late thirties who goes by the radio name “Freestyle Lewis”. Since 2004, he has lived with a brain injury, which affects his mobility, range of motion, and reflexes. He also engages in sketching and mixed media arts, often with the specific purpose of exploring disabled identity.

All the participants are non-Indigenous and white. While I communicated with Indigenous persons who were interested in participating, these interviews never progressed beyond the initial interest stage for unknown reasons. Upon sending recruitment emails containing the Letter of Information and Consent Form, I received no response, despite sending multiple follow-up emails. Fundamentally, I reproduced a white disability studies lens in failing to recruit people who are Indigenous, black, or persons of colour, thereby reinforcing whiteness within my exploration of access and disability (Bell, 2006). Upon further reflection, I believe I lacked a decolonial approach to disability within my sampling strategy, as even the recruitment poster invokes a colonial view through categorizing all non-normative conditions as "disability", thereby undermining the importance of "difference" (Lovern, 2022). As REB revisions requested that I specify the criteria for participants to self-identify as having a disability, I think this also many have been a hinderance in recruiting Indigenous participants, because some may not subscribe to the Western label of “disability” due to its colonial framework (Imada, 2017; Velarde, 2018). Furthermore, in coming to the research with a settler-colonial perspective, I neglected to decolonize my own conceptualizations of accessibility and disability through accounting for how these relationships are centered on the land within Anishinaabe knowledges. Neither the recruitment poster nor the forms refer to the research as being conducted on the traditional Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg territories. Through I acknowledged the land in the interviews and introduced decolonized conceptions of access, neither was referenced in the prior recruitment stage, which may have discouraged Indigenous persons from participating. I therefore reproduced white, colonial ideologies within my research practices through undermining the importance of the land and potentially alienating a valuable population due to my own ignorance towards these reciprocal community-based relationships (Changfoot et al., 2022).

The interviews took place over three months, between August and October of 2022. Nine of the interviews were conducted in-person within a public setting, while only one was conducted over Skype. The interviews lasted between thirty minutes to an hour-and-a-half, with the average interview being approximately fifty minutes. All interviews were recorded for the purpose of being transcribed to written documents, which was then saved to OneDrive.

3.5 *Interview Questions*

The interview questions I wrote attempted to delve into participants’ experiences with (in)accessibility, the strengths and weaknesses in the local arts’ access practices, what, if any, types of barriers they had encountered, the impacts of COVID-19, and their opinions on the AODA. The twelve questions and follow-up probes I asked included:

1. What area of the arts are you interested in?
2. What is your disability?
3. Do you feel a sense of belonging when attending arts events?
   Has this impacted your engagement with the arts?
4. Have there been times you haven't been able to or chose not to attend an arts event due to inaccessibility, and if so, why?
5. Have you ever had to leave an arts event you were attending due to it being inaccessible to your specific needs?
   Can you expand on that experience?
6. Do you feel that the local arts are a welcoming space for someone like you?
   What changes can be made to make these spaces welcoming?
7. Over the last two years, has COVID impacted your ability to engage with the arts?
8. Over the last two years, have you participated in any online arts events, and if so, what were those experiences like?
9. What can be done to improve access to the arts in Peterborough?
   How familiar are you with the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act*?
10. Do you feel that the Act has improved access and reduced barriers to art events for people with disabilities?
11. What, if any, spaces, people, or practices have removed or minimized barriers to arts events over the past five years?
12. Is there anything else you would like to add?

I designed the questions to be as open-ended as possible, to allow the participants the flexibility to determine how they wanted to answer the questions and what views, perspectives, and experiences they wanted to share. The semi-structured nature of the interview also allowed me to ask questions which delved further into the participants' statements. Overall, the participants responded well to the interview questions, with no question being skipped over in any of the interviews.

3.6 *Interviewing People with Disabilities*

I pursued qualitative research over quantitative research because I wanted to gather in-depth data focusing on people's experiences, opinions, and perspectives, rather than reducing these aspects of their lives to numeric values. As I wanted to research people with disabilities, I knew that each stage of the research process, from the sampling methods to the interviews, had to be designed to best meet their specific needs. I thus researched previous studies which had utilized qualitative methods to interview people with disabilities (Bang & Kim, 2015; Kitchin, 2000; LaMarre, 2021) to determine what approach would be most suitable to gather in-depth responses. Kitchin's (2000) research showcases people with disabilities prefer qualitative interviewing over quantitative measures, because instrumental methods such as questionnaires are regarded as shallow and manipulative. Through qualitative interviews, the participants are encouraged to verbalize their own perspectives and feelings, leading to a process in which their power can be reclaimed as the experts of their own lived experiences (Kitchin, 2000). I wanted to create a one-on-one setting wherein the interviews with the participants would be based within empathy, reciprocity, and understanding.

Kitchin’s (2000) research also noted that disabled people may become overwhelmed by interviewers due to their imbalance in power, as researchers are viewed as elite figures who are backed by their institutions, particularly if they are able-bodied. There is a pervasive worry among these participants over being badly or inaccurately portrayed in the findings, leading Kitchin (2000) to write, “only disabled researchers […] can truly understand and represent disabled people.” (p. 35). Upon reflecting further on Kitchin's words, I determined that I needed to disclose my own disability to the participants prior to the interview commencing, to build solidarity in the hopes of establishing a trusting relationship with each of the participants, wherein they could feel comfortable discussing their memories and opinions with me.

In Kerschbaum and Price's (2017) article, the authors write that non-disabled researchers tend to presume that the participants who live with disabilities will adhere to normative ways of thinking, speaking, and behaving during the in-person interview process. To overcome these stigmatizations, disabilities need to be centered as embodied forms of knowledges, in both their verbal and non-verbal cues. The participants I interviewed exhibited a few non-normative characteristics during their interview, such as long pauses between their answers, jumps between topics, and repetitive words and phrasing. Member-checking was employed throughout the interviews to ensure that I was interpreting the participants' words correctly, to avoid confusion or misinterpretations in the written transcripts. I also allowed them to email me follow-up answers to the questions after the interview had taken place, for anything they had forgotten about but wanted on the record.

Furthermore, Kerschbaum and Price (2017) note that living with disability and illness may also manifest as unpleasant emotional and physical symptoms, like anxiety. The participant can thus arrive in or descend into an unwell or upset state during the interview, which deepens their need for accommodations and breaks (Kerschbaum & Price, 2017). The interviews I conducted led to a few periods of high emotions, wherein the interviewees became overwhelmed when discussing their memories, particularly when disclosing their experiences with discrimination and barriers to the local arts. As the leading researcher, I had a responsibility to the participants to be compassionate and understanding. In these moments, I would stop the recorder to allow them to take a break and attend to their immediate needs, while also asking if there was anything I could do, offering them a drink of water, or providing a distracting topic. Only when they verbally confirmed they were ready to continue would I turn the recorder back on and proceed with the remaining questions.

In grappling with the realities of their conditions, Wendell (2001) notes that disabled people may come across as disinterested and unreliable. She emphasizes the need to be compassionate and understanding, rather than criticize their behavior, for which Wendell writes “commitment to a cause is usually equated to energy expended, even to pushing one’s body and mind excessively, if not cruelly” (p. 25). Normative expectations can be severely debilitating and sometimes even dangerous for people with disabilities. Structural changes are needed to alter these normative expectations to make space for disabled persons to participate, through altering how we conceptualize time and pacing (Wendell, 2001). I needed to be as flexible to the participant's needs as possible, while also being responsive and empathetic to any scheduling issues that arose, understanding the problems were due to the realities of their own conditions, rather than any indifference to the research.

3.7 *Data Analysis*

Gibson and Hartman (2014) write that all scholars come into their research with biases towards the topic they are exploring. To produce findings which are separate from one’s own notions towards the topic, the authors encourage following a structured data analysis to generate reliable and valid findings, making it "necessary to think carefully about what might be the best source of information and therefore data for your study." (p. 155).

However, no research can ever truly be free of biases, as all researchers come to their work with the experiences and worldviews that have shaped their interests and ideas. As a person with a disability, I have my own experiences and views which led me to propose the thesis. It is the personal encounters I have had with local communities which have shaped my desire to explore the disability arts community through my research. In striving to validate and differentiate the participants' experiences as separate from my own, the social positions I am coming into the research with also have a profound influence over the work I am pursuing in asking these specific questions to the group I am attempting to gather answers from.

Haraway's (1988) term "situated knowledge" challenges notions of objectivity within the sciences, as these bias-free claims are rooted within hierarchies centering maleness and whiteness. She argues we can never fully divorce ourselves from our lived realities when conducting research, as these shape our desire for knowledge(s), and ultimately "are about communities, not about isolated individuals." (p. 590). My own social position as a person with a disability who is involved in the local arts and has formed relationships with people in these communities has thus influenced my research interests, and specifically, my desire to give voice to people with disabilities. It is more productive to recognize how these so-called “biases” actualized and benefitted the research process, rather than attempting to make claims to bias-free, objective findings through separating myself from my own knowledge simply for the purpose of purporting universal truths (Haraway, 1988).

Nevertheless, Gibson and Hartman’s (2014) suggestions were helpful to track quotations which stood out as memorable and significant in the transcripts. Throughout the three-month interview process, I would continuously come back to re-read the interview transcripts, examining the hard copy pages to highlight specific quotes I found strong, unique, and compelling. I would also write notes to summarize these passages with words or short sentences, which further helped me to determine which questions or themes I could press participants on further in the remaining interviews (when appropriate). I also wrote memos detailing the reactions I was having throughout the interview stage, how the participants were shaping the research process, what I was learning about the topics through listening to their experiences, and how their perspectives challenged the expectations I had for the interviews.

Upon completing the interviews, I returned to the completed transcripts in late October, to begin analyzing any patterns which could be surmised through the findings, and to identify any similarities and differences that arose between the interviews. As the participants all had different types of disabilities, I expected there to be stark contrasts in their conceptualization of meaningful access practices and in their experiences with social and structural barriers, particularly with regards to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

To analyze the findings, I chose to utilize a thematic analysis to identify the unique patterns which emerged through the quotes and narratives in the participant interview transcripts. A thematic analysis, as Nowell et al. (2017) writes, is "widely used across a range of epistemologies and research questions." (p. 2). It requires the researcher to build themes from the ground up, which allows the participants' perspectives, emotions, and experiences to be centered within the presentation of the findings. However, because thematic analysis takes a relatively more relaxed probing of raw data when compared to other qualitative methods such as grounded theory, practices such as member checking, note taking, and reflexive journaling are encouraged across each stage of analysis to maintain structure and an awareness for any biases which may be proliferating through the selected codes (Nowell et al., 2017). I began by combing through each individual participant interview to explore the transcripts and look for larger patterns within their quotes which could be generated into codes. Upon determining these, I then examined and organized the codes by their similarities into bunches, which was then placed into broader themes. The themes were thus generated through a line-by-line coding method, which examines each sentence to decipher the specific messages or "codes" that arose within the raw data. Following the steps outlined in Creswell's (2014) work on qualitative methods, the codes were separated into expected codes, unanticipated codes, and unusual codes, to increase findings' validity and reliability. These codes were then separated and summarized through short phrases to describe their meaning.

I was drawn towards conducting a thematic analysis upon reading LaMarre et al.’s (2021) research exploring relaxed performance, Collins et al.’s (2022) study on barriers to the arts, and Gratton’s (2020) article focusing on arts accessibility, all of which conducted interviews with people with disabilities and focused on mainstream accessibility within the arts-based spaces. Their work emphasized the need to ensure that the presentation of the findings would allow the participants’ voice to emerge clearly in letting them speak for themselves as a marginalized group. Since thematic analysis would serve to build the findings through the participants’ raw quotes, I also believed this method was important to use for the particular type of research I was conducting, because people with disabilities have reported their own fears regarding being misrepresented and exploited within academic research (Kitchin, 2000).

As Nowell et al. (2017) note, one of the disadvantages of pursuing a thematic analysis within qualitative research is that it lacks trustworthiness in failing to be reliable and accurate. The themes I developed to summarize the findings are based on a relatively small sample size. I make no claims to the research comprehensively representing all disabled persons' experiences with the arts or even all disabled persons living in Peterborough-Nogojiwanong, but only the 10 people I recruited for interviews. I have attempted to increase the research's validity through member checking during the interviews, allowing the participants to review the written transcripts and thesis write-up, and writing reflexive notes to account for my own biases.

3.8 *Document Analysis*

For the purpose of enhancing the findings, I also conducted a document analysis, comparing the themes which emerged through the participant interviews to the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* (AODA). The AODA is a mandate that was established in 2005 and outlines the provincial standards and expectations for access measures in Ontario. The mandate's purpose is to enact a "fully accessible" society by 2025 through encouraging all businesses and organizations, including commercial and non-commercial sectors, to remove barriers to education and employment, transportation, services, buildings, and more (Kovac, 2018, para. 1). The AODA takes a barrier-free approach through framing structural barriers as responsible for disabled people’s poor social and economic status, for which the removal of these barriers is viewed as the solution to the inequalities disabled people experience. However, despite the AODA's proposed goals, the Act appears to lack the incentives needed to pressure or influence these sectors to prioritize accessibility - other than strong encouragement - making the goal of an accessible society seem unrealistic and unachievable by their own standards (AODA, 2005).

Hence, I wanted to explore the participants’ own awareness and understanding of the AODA itself through the interview questions, and through comparing their own views and experiences regarding local access measures to AODA standards. The document analysis examines whether there are similarities and/or discrepancies in the ways that access is conceived and implemented based on disabled people's own perceptions. I further examined what conditions the Act categorizes as a disability and whose needs it may be failing to address and respond to.

As the AODA was established over 15 years ago, it is important to be aware of how it continues to shape organizational approaches towards access practices, particularly because it reflects the attitudes and ideologies of the period in which it was enacted. For example, it appears to invoke the social model of disability in centering structural barriers as responsible for ableism within Ontario (AODA, 2005). The literature shows that the discourse regarding disability and accessibility has changed since 2005, as scholars and activists have critiqued the social model for focusing solely on physical barriers (Kafer, 2013; Oliver, 2013; Shakespeare, 2021). These long-standing government measures thus need to be critiqued as discourse progresses. I believe these critiques are more relevant now than ever before because it is 2022, less than three years away from the AODA's deadline to implement an accessible society to improve disabled people's lives.

3.9 *Working Premises*

In pursuing research which explores the lived experiences of marginalized persons, I believe there is an importance in accounting for the positionality I have and unpacking the biases I am coming into the research with. I am a white, non-Indigenous, disabled, queer, Canadian-born woman. The research I am conducting gives me power over the participants, who are an extremely economically, socially, and politically disenfranchised group in Canada. While I do belong to the community I am interviewing, my perspective is limited to the specific type of in/visible disability I have, as a person who is able to fluidly pass as able-bodied within certain spaces. While I am not attempting to engage in what Schalk (2013) refers to as an "oppression Olympics" in making these statements, I believe that it is crucial for scholars engaged in disability studies to recognize how varied and unique disabled people's experiences with social and structural oppression are, to further validate the importance in gathering a range of perspectives and to avoid gatekeeping within the research process.

Furthermore, I am leading the research with the goal of creating social change to help improve disabled people's lives in Peterborough-Nogojiwanong. The purpose of all research in disability studies should be to advocate for change within the social and cultural institutions that are responsible for upholding marginalized persons' unequal social and political status, as Kitchin (2000) writes, "for academia and research to become truly emancipatory and empowering it has to actively seek change rather than hoping that the `right people' read the work and act upon it." (p. 44). In occupying the role of the researcher, I have a responsibility to the community I am studying to use the findings to advocate for changes to help ensure that disabled people have meaningful opportunities to fully participate in the arts, rather than simply discarding these goals once the thesis is completed and defended. Therefore, I am seeking to pursue the research in accordance with the Bodies in Translation (BIT) principles through 1) supporting and investing in disability and difference-led art and artists; 2) engaging in radical reciprocity through seizing opportunities to use the research to better conditions for people with non-normative body-minds; 3) improve upon current accessibility measures through advocating for more inclusive, relaxed access practices; and 4) strengthening my commitment to making arts-based spaces more accessible to Indigenous, queer, women, Black, people of colour, and disabled populations through representing, consulting, and making space for these communities, as well as accounting for the complex systemic violence which continues to impact these groups (Rice et al., 2018).

I am also coming into the research through the lens of a white, settler perspective, who lives in a colonized nation-state. I recognize that I am conducting research as a newcomer to the stolen land of Nogojiwanong, a place I was never invited to. I occupy the traditional territories of the Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg, an Indigenous nation who cultivated and cared for these lands for centuries prior to the arrival of white Europeans, who are my ancestors. What I conceive of as access is based within a white, colonial framework and lacks the nuance to recognize how Indigenous and racialized persons engage with colonized spaces. However, through utilizing a critical disability theory framework and through reading the work of Indigenous scholars, I am seeking to expand upon my colonial worldview to better understand how access operates as a cultural barrier to hinder Indigenous people from fully participating in the arts, and to further determine ways to challenge white, settler-colonial dominance within these spaces. I also intend to continue supporting artists who are Indigenous, black, persons of colour, LGBTQ, women, and disabled in both local and national arts, to challenge the dominating white, middle-class, heteronormative, able-bodied, and male hierarchies which uphold artistic elitism.

3.10 *Conclusion*

While designing the research, I wanted to hold myself accountable for the privilege and power I held as a researcher studying disability, primarily to separate and distinguish my own lived experiences as a disabled person from the participants. I continued reflecting upon these working premises while conducting the interviews, writing up the transcripts, and evaluating the findings. These insights will be expanded upon further in the upcoming *Emerging Themes* chapter, where I will delve into the overarching themes that emerged through the participant interviews and correlate these to concepts within the relevant literature.

Chapter 4 Emerging Themes

In *Emerging Themes,* I will present the main findings from the one-on-one interviews I conducted with the participants from August to October in late 2022. This chapter will provide the findings through detailed quotes from the participants, who expressed their own experiences with the local arts, their perspectives on the barriers and gaps within current accessibility measures, how their engagement was impacted during COVID-19, as well as potential ways the arts can be improved to increase inclusion and access for people with disabilities. Through their deeply personal and thought-provoking reflections, the participants provided much needed insights into how people with non-normative body-minds are implicated within current accessibility measures in Peterborough-Nogojiwanong, as well as potential changes that can be made to make these practices more meaningful and sustainable.

To reiterate the purpose of the research I will once more restate the four research questions, which are: 1) how do people with disabilities define "access", 2) from the perspectives of the participants, are there barriers in access to the local arts, 3) has COVID-19 impacted access to the arts in Peterborough, and if so, how, and 4) how do participant perceptions of access compare with the standards outlined in the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act*?

The thematic analysis I conducted through coding the raw data findings yielded several notable commonalities and discrepancies. The five themes which arose from the participant interviews include: *Access as Community-Based Care*, *On the Fringe*, *Access Labour*, *Virtual Consumption*, and *Neoliberal Compliance*.

The initial research question I asked explored what people with disabilities consider to be meaningful access practices, referring to actions that serve increase their engagement with the arts. Overwhelmingly, the participants identified *Access as Community-Based Care* as being the most effective way to increase their participation and/or attendance in arts events and programs, with *Creative Practices* emerging as a sub-theme.

The second research question asked whether there are any barriers hindering disabled people from engaging in the local arts. The overarching theme that surfaced through the findings was *On the Fringe*, which was structured into three sub-sections: *Tokenizing*, *On Display*, and *In the Margins*. Another notable theme related to the second research question was *Access Labour*.

The third research question sought to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted disabled people's access to the arts, to which I identified *Virtual Consumption* as the corresponding theme.

Finally, the fourth question focused on how the participants' views on access differ from the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* (AODA). As the interviewees expressed neutral to negative opinions towards current accessibility measures, I determined the final theme to be *Neoliberal Compliance*.

The quotes have been taken directly from the participant interviews and will be presented in accordance with the overarching themes. As I provided the participants the option as to whether they would like to be referred to by their own name or a pseudonym of their choice, Wes, Andrew, Patrick, PJ, Brad, Pat, and Sam chose to disclose their own name while Zoe, Micah, and Lyah used a pseudonym to conceal their identities. Before delving further into the themes, the upcoming section will briefly outline the *Framework* I plan to use to analyze the findings, connecting the participants' experiences and perspectives to the related scholarship.

4.1 *Framework*

To conceptualize the interview findings, I will establish a theoretical framework that will be utilized to align with the corresponding themes. For each thematic section, the interview data will be connected to different working concepts to further expand upon the findings' overall significance in relation to the literature. In *Access as Community-Based Care* I will reference disability justice and access intimacy; *On the Fringe* will correlate the data to Garland-Thomson's "misfits" and her writing on staring; TechnoAccess and crip technoscience are drawn upon in *Virtual Consumption*; *Access Labour* references post-disability ideology, while *Neoliberal Compliance* explores the findings with regards to neoliberal futurities.

For *Access as Community-Based Care,* I will relate the findings to the concepts of disability justice and access intimacy. Disability justice strives to unpack and dismantle the hierarchical power structures upholding the ableist ideologies and practices which marginalize, separate, and alienate people with disabilities (Mingus, 2011). Mingus emphasizes the value in forming reciprocal and interdependent relationships, which requires communities to prioritize caring for those who experience a lack of access in their lives and to bring these issues to the forefront of their platform(s). Furthermore, access intimacy is created through the care work within communities, as it creates a sense of satisfaction in having one's access needs being recognized and responded to, rather than being unseen or ignored (Mingus, 2011). Access intimacy occurs among people with disabilities and can also transpire between able-bodied and disabled persons. However, that relationship requires able-bodied people to consistently showcase their commitment to creating a world that is premised upon accessibility and working alongside disabled people to actualize those possibilities, rather than seeking to integrate them into unequitable spaces that are incompatible with their body-minds (Mingus, 2017). The underpinning of disability justice is the rejection of social expectations for independence because it leaves people with disabilities to grapple with social and structural barriers through their own cognitive, physical, and economic means. There is further importance in accounting for how these lived experiences range between people with various types of disabilities and to pursue care practices which are reflective of those intricacies. In ways, disability justice parallels Indigenous views towards difference, as various cultures place value on communal living to help each member thrive through reciprocal, mutual support (Lovern, 2022). As Mingus (2011) writes, communities need to work to care for people with disabilities, because ableist ideologies "undergirds notions of whose bodies are considered valuable, desirable and disposable." (para. 18).

For *On the Fringe,* I will relate the findings to Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's theory of "misfits". Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2011) developed the concept of "misfitting" through a feminist materialist perspective to describe how people with disabilities engage with physical spaces. A "misfit" challenges the ableist need to locate disabilities as existing as problems within people's bodies, rather, Garland-Thomson argues these structures create temporal and spatial contexts that are responsible for labelling certain characteristics as "disabled" therefore constituting "misfits". The conditions that lead to one's misfitting changes over space and time, which denotes inconsistencies – not a fixedness. While no environment is inherently wrong, certain structures are incompatible with people's body-minds, requiring the structure to be changed for all persons to fit. Garland-Thomson's (2011) concept extends to identities beyond disability, as anyone can encounter misfits with their environments because these are constructed to privilege bodies that reflect the status quo. Furthermore, I will also touch upon Garland-Thomson's (2005) views on staring, as a physical gesture that signifies belonging and acceptance within social environments. The stare is weaponized to stigmatize and punish those who are perceived to violate social norms, such as when people with disabilities enter a space designed for able-bodiedness, for which staring works to express a negative response to their presence and any resulting behaviours that are considered deviant within those contexts.

The section on *Virtual Consumption* will reference crip technoscience. Hamraie and Fritsch (2019) conceptualize crip technoscience as a process which positions people with disabilities at the center of technological development as those who have first-hand experience of barriers hindering their social participation, with an emphasis on Indigenous, black, and people of colour's perspectives. Crip technoscience challenges the top-down “expertise” conventionally claimed by non-disabled persons designing technology in powerful positions (i.e., engineers) through empowering people with disabilities as knowledge holders. Hamraie and Fritsch’s (2019) manifesto resists approaching accessibility through “assimilating” disabled persons into structures designed for able-bodiedness and able-mindedness which frame disability as "an individual experience of impairment rather than a collective political experience of world-building and dismantling.” (p. 12). Rather, crip technoscience purports “access-making as disabled peoples’ acts of non-compliance and protest.” (p. 10). Crip technoscience should be developed to create "friction" as a means of generating greater awareness for structural barriers, as well as the practices/materials which can be developed to make these structures more equitable. The manifesto seeks to pursue collective access in basing crip technoscience in radical interdependence, eschewing medical and charity approaches towards disabilities which frames people as needing to be saved for able-bodied people's own ease, which further “emphasizes that disabled people are not mere consumers of, or objects for, assimilationist technologies, but instead have agential, politicized, and transformative relationships to technoscience.” (Hamraie & Fritsch, 2019, p. 16).

Virtual Consumption further references TechnoAccess to conceptualize the connections between technology and access, as it provides more opportunities to develop accessibility for disabled and aging populations. Like crip technoscience, TechnoAccess “broadly and critically considers accessibility to be a complex, politically charged process–even when disabled and aging people are included in technology development.” (Temple Jones et al., 2021, p. 2). As per Temple Jones et al. (2021), when disabled people are positioned as co-creators in TechnoAccess, these practices become more meaningful and impactful because these are designed to center the nuances within their lived experiences. TechnoAccess can reinforce barriers when people with various types of disabilities fail to be consulted in the designing and planning stages, because each disability is unique and allows people to engage with the world in diverse, multifaceted manners, further enriching their knowledge on technological accessibility (Temple Jones et al., 2021).

In *Access Labour*, I reference Hamraie's (2016) concept of post-disability ideology, referring to the ways in which social institutions ignore and undermine the marginalization disabled people continue to face due to the recent progress made through acts such as the AODA. The worldview assumes greater accessibility has been achieved because of the advancements made through such policies. It is then up to people with disabilities, rather than institutions, to advocate for stronger access practices in their own lives. Hamraie (2016) writes, “because communities are often defined by shared spaces, these norms also render less apparent those of us for whom these material features of the built environment determine the extent of our participation.” (p. 261). The able-bodied populace who these spaces are designed for are unable to recognize and account for the labour that goes into finding and building accessible spaces, because it is demanding, overwhelming, and time-consuming to search for these areas. For Hamraie (2016), access needs to be approached as a non-fixed process that changes and develops overtime, which further depends upon the specific needs of those occupying a space.

Finally, the section on *Neoliberal Compliance* will correlate the findings to Fritsch's (2016) article on neoliberal futurities, which refers to how futures are envisioned under neoliberal economic structures. As Fritsch writes, “neoliberal futurity—based on an economy of always more surplus value to extract, always new markets to develop, always new ways to download social responsibilities onto individuals, always evermore ways to exploit the many in order to benefit the few.” (p. 13). These futurities are further facilitated through bio-capitalistic practices, referring to the increase in scientific and medical advancements that are invested in "deregulation, privatization, managing risk, and financial speculation that mobilize hope for a better future.” (p. 13). Neoliberal futurities are premised to center able-bodiedness and able-mindedness. While disabled lives are viewed as being filled with suffering and ultimately worthless, neoliberal ideologies also regards their existence as holding the potential to showcase bio-capitalist excellence. Cure is invested in for financial gains, which then situates people with disabilities as responsible for fixing their conditions. A world that values people with disabilities as whole and complete beings, wherein their futurities are imagined through their participation in social life is thus abandoned for corporate incentives, leaving their futurities to nothing more than absence. Those who are willing and able to overcome their conditions are then held up as the pinnacle example to showcase the structure's success (Fritsch, 2016).

Bio-capitalism is economically invested in futurities “to overcome the limits of vulnerable bodies” and to ensure that people with disabilities, particularly younger persons, can participate in the labour force (while also being capable of contending with any changes that may transpire within the workplace) (Fritsch, 2016, p. 13). For neoliberal futurities, disability is therefore only included in ways which specifically reinforce a compulsory able-bodiedness to uphold an economic structure that demands and depends upon "healthy" bodies (McRuer, 2001). As Fritsch (2016) writes, disabilities that can more easily be exploited within the labour force have far more potential to participate in neoliberal futurities socially, economically, physically, and spatially, because those “who can be easily accommodated, included, enhanced, and capacitated by forms of bio-capitalism are much more likely to thrive.” (p. 23).

Hence, the framework will therefore allow me to delve deeper into the thematic analysis of the interview findings. The upcoming section will begin with focusing on the theme *Access as Community-Based Care*, exploring how meaningful access practices are created through the work within communicative, reciprocal relationships by those who strive to improve conditions for people with non-normative body-minds. To reiterate, I am arguing that effective accessibility emerges through the grassroots work of communities, requiring ongoing communication with and between invested parties to prioritize the complex and unique needs of those with non-normative body-minds.

4.2 *Access as Community-Based Care*

The initial theme which arose through the data was *Access as Community-Based Care*. The participants viewed access as being based within a community that seeks to care and provide for people with disabilities through attending to their needs to ensure they can participate in arts events. The theme aligned with Mingus’ (2011) concept access intimacy, which describes the feelings of closeness and care which arise for people with non-normative body-minds when others attempt to meet their access needs. According to Andrew, “it doesn't matter what act or bylaw you introduce. It's about the community.” Patrick shared these sentiments, “I don’t see there being any easy fixes […] other than people continuing to be welcoming and accommodate the best that they possibly can.”

Micah spoke to how a community’s care practices for marginalized persons make up for the absence of state-facilitated resources, because ‘that's the primary way in which you're able to survive. That's not through the care of the state, because the state could give less than a fuck about you. It’s through community. And it's through like, for example, sharing our experiences and things like this where we say “yes, I've had a similar experience”, “what do you think about this”, or “how can we promote this” […] those kinds of communities of collective care, even though they exist in marginalized communities, they're pretty much the only way that people with disabilities actually survive and live meaningful lives.’ Disability justice transpires through person-to-person relationships, rather than larger institutional measures, because these are responsible for upholding the social and economic barriers that maintain disabled people’s disenfranchisement with the status quo (Mingus, 2018).

A personal anecdote provided by Andrew showcased his own experience with working within a group to ensure their meeting places are physically accessible for all members. “I'm involved in a small group right now,” Andrew begins, “and one of our members has mobility issues. And we actually have to brainstorm on where we're going to hold the next meeting so that she can come, because if there's stairs involved, she can't - she's not going to come. So, we've got to consciously remember that, and it is an issue because not every place is accessible. We've got a brainstorm on accessible venues to hold our meetings just for that one member, but we do it for her because we want her to be part of the group and she does as well." When attending arts events, having support persons to go with can help people with disabilities navigate an event with far more comfortability and ease, as PJ tells, "if I can go with someone I know, if I can have a support person with me, that makes a huge difference. Finding people to be in that role is not always easy."

Community-care practices can come through organizations and facilitators making strides to embrace non-normativity within artistic spaces, as Pat Lewis states, "I felt very welcomed by different people in the artistic community. And also, on behalf of my radio show, whenever I go to live shows, performers were always excited for the chance to get their music on air, so they were always completely welcoming. And really encouraging me to be there and stuff like that […] I've always found some of the most genuine people are in the artistic community because it's a very open minded and accepting culture." PJ also found these practices to be beneficial, "a lot of the organizations do have disabled people working there and that's very helpful for me." An intimacy with another person is requirement for some individuals to even begin participating in the arts, as it creates a sense of ease and comfortability when entering a space that is not designed for non-normative body-minds and can potentially create new opportunities for marginalization (Mingus, 2011).

A welcoming culture can also be traced back to people who support disabled artists as audience members, as Wes expresses, "within the arts community, there are many individuals that are very supportive, especially audience members. I do shows and people come. I started painting and people buy my paintings. In Peterborough, I can be any artist I want to be. I can be a choreographer, a dancer, and I perform professionally. I'm a musician […] I paint now. So, I'm allowed to be an artist in this community."

Overall, establishing these social networks within a community are crucial to helping people with disabilities begin to engage with the arts, as Andrew shared that “I've come out of my shell quite a bit and I have a great network of friends that are in all of the arts, and through collaborating with them, that's really helped me a lot to gain confidence and to actually complete projects that I've started, because that's been another huge issue for me is half a dozen started projects, and none of them completed. So, that's starting to shift a little bit, but it's through my effort of networking, which has really helped me.”

The participants further viewed community-care practices as needed to make up for unequal social structures which marginalize and exclude people with non-normative body-minds. Wes highlights the core principles of disability justice like Mingus (2011) through envisioning accessibility as a process which unfolds through ongoing communication between and among able-bodied and disabled communities, because “the problem with accommodations, they’re fucked. They’re always an afterthought and never detailed enough. Say you’re going to an event, how close is the accessible parking? You’re going to ask somebody with mobility issues to come from four blocks away, right? I’ve been accommodating people ever since I started doing theatre and dance. It was never about them ever having a disability, it was about *making people comfortable* [italics added for emphasis].”

Several of the participants expressed awareness for the structural barriers which prevents physical access, as Patrick - who depends on a walker for mobility - states “there’s been so many times I’ve wanted to see things at a venue, and I just can’t do the stairs and the washroom stairs.” Andrew also noted “I know some of the spaces you've got to go up a flight of stairs. If you're in a wheelchair, you can't attend that event […] lot of the places are on the second floor.” Wes also spoke to the difficulties in selecting an accessible space for a show, because “you can’t do shows in many places because it’s inaccessible. A large part of the population here – we have seniors who are not going to climb up the stairs to go to a show.”

Community-based care practices are needed because the overarching structural barriers barring disabled people’s participation have no cheap, quick solutions. Speaking on inaccessible buildings, Patrick reiterates, “I get that there’s no easy fix. It’s just frustrating that in 2022 we can’t figure out something, but I get it. But these new buildings, with all the new construction, that’s something we can’t talk about that’s terrible, even though there’s supposed to be new laws in place. The existing buildings, I get that. How can you fix that? I don’t see a remedy or a fix, unfortunately. Unless you reconstruct a whole new building, but there’s like a grandfather law, that unless they do renovations, that they don’t have to put in accessibility.” The "grandfather law" Patrick notes refers to the legal protections regarding older buildings within Ontario’s Building Code. While new buildings are required to meet the current codes, existing buildings are only required to meet the accessibility standards that align with the version of the Code the building was constructed in (unless renovating the building). Therefore, developers have no obligations to integrate current accessibility features into older buildings because those standards were only established in updated versions of the Building Code (Accessibility in Ontario’s Building Code, 2021). Only through community care can people work around these complicated and costly barriers to help people with disabilities access the spaces where arts events take place. Meaningful access is more than structural accommodations, as Wes states, “we think that if we put a wheelchair ramp in, then we’ve accomplished our goal and we haven’t.”

Meaningful access is achieved when disabled people’s needs are recognized and responded to, as it validates their concerns and prioritizes their desires in compassionate ways.

Access is as much the process of listening to someone and recognizing the problems impacting their daily lives as it is implementing a ramp as an alternative to stairs (Mingus, 2011).

4.2.1 *Creative Practices*

The participants shared a few alterative practices employed within the local community which strive to make the arts more accessible to marginalized persons. For example, Wes noted the pay-what-you-can (PWYC) practice, which serves to reduce economic barriers through allowing audience members to determine how much they will pay to attend shows. As Wes states, “it’s wonderful that we have a lot of events that are free, because you know, I’m poor, right? I’m on disability. So, it’s wonderful that there are free events, especially in the summertime, that are quality events too.” They further argue, “accessibility isn’t just about building a ramp, it’s about economics too, right? It’s largely about economics, because if you’re rich, you may have your own portable ramp, right?”

Meaningful access practices need to be enacted with the purpose of caring for people with disabilities. For example, Brad mentioned relaxed performance as a design which subverts able-bodied conventions to create an environment wherein audience members can attend to their unique needs without facing judgement or shame. As noted in the literature review, relaxed performance introduces flexible features into the arts-based spaces to create a more relaxed environment for audiences, allowing them to increase their comfortability and ease, particularly for those who struggle with the expectations for conventional theatre etiquette (Temple Jones et al., 2022). Brad refers to these features, noting ‘people argue that it’s not the same show. Well, you’re right that it’s not the same show, it’s adapted for people that are having issues and troubles with seeing a “normal” show, whatever that means. I’m all for that.’

The participants also noted the advantages in holding events in outdoor spaces, viewing the outside conditions as far more comfortable and easier to navigate. Lyah cites the pandemic as leading her to "realize how much I would like there to be more just like outdoor art in general, for COVID safety and accessibility, but I think also because it makes it more accessible in other ways […] because I'm not so stressed out about the atmosphere, the safety, who's there, masks. Also, you can just like come and go a little bit easier too. It's not a matter of getting in and out the door." For Wes, an outdoor space increases accessibility physically, economically, and spatially, as they detailed their plans for their upcoming show, "I'm going to perform it outside, so that they [unhoused persons] can come. When I did those four shows in 2019, they were PWYC, they were by in large quite accessible physically…it was easy to come and see the show, it was only 12 or 15 minutes long, so nobody had to stand or sit for too long." Brad, who experiences tendinitis, echoed these spatial advantages, because he can move around to control the noise levels, "I have the luxury of going over there [points to the distance]. More often than not, that's better." The example showcases how accessibility can be approached through ways that center interdependency, because marginalized groups are centered when working towards collective care, as the specificities of their needs are more likely to be addressed in care practices that are developed to benefit a multitude of needs (Mingus, 2017).

4.3 *On the Fringe*

The second theme which arose is *On the Fringe,* referring to how people with disabilities are excluded and marginalized in artistic spaces in unique and subtle ways, even while organizations and/or individuals are attempting to reduce these barriers. The theme has been separated into the three following sub-sections: *Tokenizing, On Display,* and *In the Margins.* The theme will further be strengthened with connections to Garland-Thomson's concept of a "misfit" and their writing on staring, as well as a brief reference to Mingus' views on disability justice within *Tokenizing*. The findings demonstrate how the communication required for meaningful access to occur can lead to tokenizing, isolating, and marginalizing people with disabilities in arts-based spaces when poorly practiced.

4.3.1 *Tokenizing*

Several participants highlighted the problem with tokenism in the arts, referring to the process in which organizations will include people with disabilities for the purpose of appearing more equitable and progressive than they are. As Wes states, "I'm tokenized all the time. Do you know how many grants people call me for because I have a disability? […] and if I get money then good, I have money, but they call me because I have a disability or because I'm queer, or for other reasons because we've tokenized disabled people."

PJ spoke on the tokenism which occurs during decision-making processes, as "it's 2 out of 12, 1 or 2 out of 10. That's your support committee there? People who don't know or have no idea […] So, some people are either unwilling or unaware, I don't know. I don't know what the deal is, but they think it's so great if they have one or two disabled people on their board. Who – I've been on boards and in meetings, and often they don't say much, or they're asked one or two questions. And everyone else discusses it and they kind of sit on the fringe, observing the participation." PJ concludes, "it's non-disabled people making decisions for disabled people." Tokenizing conflicts with the core principles of disability justice, as Mingus (2011) writes, "just because disabled people are in the room doesn't mean there is no ableism […] or that people won't pretend we're invisible." (para. 6).

Negative consequences can come from exploiting disabled people in these performative gestures. For PJ, she feels that these actions are “further isolating. I don’t want to be one of the two token disabled people at the table. I want to be running the thing.” Patrick reiterated these points, arguing “this is why I think people don’t leave their homes, honestly. You know, because they’re either afraid to or they don’t feel comfortable, and they don’t feel respected.”

Furthermore, tokenization deters meaningful representation of disabled people, as Wes states, “involving more people is the best thing you can do - and be overt about it! I want someone who has a nuance in this show! And figure it out. Try to accommodate that individual. Maybe you will learn something. We don’t do that. We tokenize. They choose one person and lift that person up, and then they don’t talk to them again.” Accessibility needs to be practiced as more than simply offering tokenized inclusion within a space that centers able-bodied persons, but for disabled persons “to be understood and to be able to take part in principled struggle together—to be able to be *human* together. Not just placated or politely listened to [original emphasis]” (Mingus, 2018, para. 24).

To avoid tokenizing disabled performers within shows, Sam further noted the importance of representing people with disabilities, stating that “I’ve been to some shows where I've seen people cast but have like actual disabilities, be it physical disabilities, or speech impediments or language disabilities. And they've been cast not in a role that needs to be such […] Think about someone who can't walk and they're in a little chair and they get an opportunity to do something in dance. Something that would be beautiful that would work to their ability, right. And they could seamlessly fit in. I don't know how to do it, but, fit into like a production where it's not just about looking at this person in a wheelchair.”

Wes recounted their own shows to demonstrate how organizers can challenge tokenism in the arts, because ‘they all had people with nuances, which is my word for disabilities. The entire cast, the entire crew, everybody involved had nuances. Nobody else has done that. Nobody can do that because they don’t have the patience or the will to. They pat themselves on the back when they say that something is accessible, but it’s not accessible. You know, and then they just say, “well then, it’s not accessible. We’ve done our part.”’

Consulting and representing disabled people in meaningful ways, rather than exploiting them for performative, symbolic purposes can bring a multitude of benefits, as Wes says, “just involve more people with nuances. Don’t be so weirded out by it […] they’re contributing members to our society. They’re part of the community. And they’re fucking different, they think differently – and not all of them – the people I’ve known behave differently, think differently, act differently, and they teach by their behavior, they teach.”

4.3.2 *On Display*

The participants disclosed their own negative experiences while attending art events, which resulted in them feeling like they were *On Display* when attempting to attend to their specific needs. Patrick expressed his dislike for access measures which place attention on his physical disability, such as lifts, stating “I don’t feel comfortable using that because to me, I don’t get embarrassed too often, but I don’t know, that’s just like a show. You’re on display, and you’ve got to get someone to operate it, and I don’t like that.” Patrick finds it “sweet and wonderful, but it’s almost like the whole venue is on me and my limitations.” In stepping into an environment designed for able-bodied people, Patrick becomes a visible “misfit” within the venue, even while being provided with accommodations, as these reinforce his out-of-place presence (Garland-Thomson, 2011).

PJ also echoed these feelings, recalling a show which employed support workers, however, ‘I had to leave in tears. It was about mental health and addiction. It was a performance piece, very good. A bunch of fantastic artists. They gave a warning, both in the program and in the verbal warning at the beginning that this could be very upsetting and triggering, “we have people here if you need someone to talk to, we’re going to have a panel afterwards.” Having seen the production, I was just way too screwed up to participate in any of the supposed supports, so I just left in tears.’

When expanding on the experience, PJ further discussed how leaving during a performance violates theatre etiquette, as ‘the producers, the writers, the actors are like, “wow, she got up to leave.” You know, so what does that do for your next participation or your next interaction with these people? Or you don’t go to the event […] that spotlight on you as you get up, excuse me, pardon me, look at your toes and walk out. The whole production team is like “wow, she walked out.”’ While she acknowledged the benefits in employing support persons, she criticized how the practice is implemented because “it was like non-mentally ill people planning an event for the mentally ill and missing the boat.” The stare symbolizes which groups and behaviors are considered acceptable and unacceptable, serving as a means of social punishment for any perceived deviation from normativity (Garland-Thomson, 2005).

Wes also recalled a traumatic experience in which they had an autistic reaction to a non-noise-controlled show. “The music was – 90 decibels are generally the top end of how loud something should be. And for sure, the music was well over 100 decibels. It was just pumped. I had my autistic response to it, which was, I started slapping myself on the head and to tell people to turn it down, turn it down. I left as quickly as I could, but I traumatized the person I was with, and I am no longer welcome at the venue until I apologize. Of course, the venue refuses to acknowledge that what they did was make it completely inaccessible. And there were other people there who found it uncomfortable as well.” Thus, rather than their recognizing their own actions in violating accessibility guidelines, the venue cited Wes’ autistic reaction to a noise which surpassed decibel standards as the problem because, like PJ, they defied traditional theatre etiquette.

The pandemic also led to experiences in which people with disabilities were placed *On Display* when following safety practices, such as masking, particularly for immunocompromised persons. As Lyah, who is diabetic, recalls a music show wherein ‘I had planned to wear a mask the whole time and then my blood sugar went low […] And I should have just gone outside to correct it, but there's just like the social anxiety hits where you're like, “oh my god, people are gonna think I'm rude for walking out.”’ The social stigmatization which comes through attending to one’s access needs during performances can lead to disabled people neglecting their health and wellbeing for fear of looking disruptive and rude.

Zoe, an immunocompromised breast cancer survivor, also recalled similar experiences to Lyah, ‘I think sometimes I've been the only person wearing a mask and then certainly felt excluded and pressured by people, you know, numerous times, “you can take your mask off, you can take your mask off.”’ She describes ‘a culture of feeling perhaps ostracized, or you know, yeah, like I said, like just a lot of times of “oh, you're going to wear a mask? You can take your mask off.” It's difficult and you know, especially because it's such a small town.’ Zoe’s experience further showcases how misfitting changes based on time and space, as her desire to wear a mask to protect her health as an immunocompromised person may have been viewed as more acceptable earlier in the pandemic or within a different theatre (Garland-Thomson, 2011).

4.3.3 *In the Margins*

In the Margins was another common sentiment which arose among the participants, in reference to their disabilities and their identities as disabled people being misunderstood and unacknowledged. As access tends to be enacted under basic structural accommodations, such as ramps, the subtle and complex ways in which disability is experienced continues to be unaccounted for in current access measures by local organizations.

When recalling his experiences attending arts events, Sam discussed how his low-vision abilities are rarely addressed by organizers, which reinforces the barriers he encounters while participating in events. As Sam discusses, "I don't think they think about somebody like me. My blindness, my visual issues are so on the cusp. I guess that nobody talks about the person who can see but can't see very well. That's probably something that's common is that people aren't - they don't think of what your disability is, so it's so hard to explain it to someone. They don't make art for your disability." He continues, "you know if I'm at event and I can't see it, you know, lot of the times a lot of the things that I can do is - I can't see things, but I can hear it […] so, I don't tell anyone." Sam's experience demonstrates the fluidity of misfitting, as Garland-Thomson (2011) challenges the notion of disability having a fixed nature. One's disability doesn't cease to exist when they don't encounter barriers, it is simply that the barriers create difficulties fitting within certain environments that impose those material conditions.

Challenging the stigmatizing attitudes which uphold these barriers can bring difficulties in requesting accessibility, because many disabilities are subtle and non-visible. Brad addressed the stigmatization surrounding invisible disabilities, as "most people don't see it and don't understand it. Some people are like, "is it really that bad? Because *you look fine* [italics added for emphasis]." Like Sam, Brad tends to hide his tendinitis because "it isn't up there with all the big ones [disabilities], so it gets a little tiring. I think that's why I don't bother saying anything to people."

When coordinating an event earlier in the year, PJ had a demeaning experience with the organizers who were publicly debating her participation due to their perceived constraints of her mental illness. 'I was on a thread with four authors – five authors that were reading, and organizers. I was kept off the thread for a while, because I wasn't sure if I was going to do it. Two of the people involved were discussing me and what they should do about me and "should we just plan it and not tell her, then invite her at the last minute?" It was like…I was on this thread, and I thought I was getting the information. I don't know why they dropped me off the thread, but they did. While they were discussing me. I found that most upsetting.' She further contends that "I think they were trying to be helpful. I think that was the intention and the motivation, but for them to judge that I wasn't capable of participating and making up my – it was just very strange."

"It's [disabled people] oftentimes like the last group that gets recognized within repressed marginalized groups." Micah argues. "There's like a kind of almost like a culture, a cultural shift now, where we're working towards challenging definitions of ableism, but ableism is…it's almost like it's the least like point-able thing. You can say like, that is an instance of homophobia or that is an instance of racism, and that is an instance of Islamophobia that is very clear, but where ableism is - because it's so deeply ingrained, because labour is interconnected with 'able' bodies, it's hard to."

Static and fixed notions regarding what disabilities are "legitimate" also works to undermine the unique lived experiences for those who hold a multitude of marginalized identities. Micah drew parallels between the overlap in queerness and disability, as he states, 'in art spaces, you can tell when someone's being fake. Like they're taken aback. I'm not the most queer presenting person, but small things, you notice small acts of judgement. Checking things out. Trying to make sure that they can put you into a category. So, "clearly this person is like this, and I feel more comfortable." It's like that with non-visible disabilities too.'

The ways in which disabled people are marginalized thus goes deeper than simply physical inaccessibility. As Zoe states, "I know in terms of physical space you know, there are very few accessible venues in terms of safe space, culturally, psychologically...that type of safety - there tend to be quite few." Furthermore, Lyah brought up an example regarding accessible spaces for LGBTQ persons being held in a local church in Peterborough-Nogojiwanong, as she notes "it's accessible for like wheelchair users. And I remember one time someone said to me that like, that's not safe for queer Indigenous people, because like, probably - also, lots of other people too probably have trauma with the church - but that like this person was specifically talking about like why would like Indigenous people want to come to a church to attend these events? Like, it's like, okay, it might be like, like free maybe for your affordable venue, but like, who is it excluding? Churches are like such a site of complexity and trauma." Churches have been created specifically for white settlers, alienating Indigenous persons due to a lack of acknowledgement for the systemic violence linked with these institutions, subsequently manifesting their misfitting within these spaces (Garland-Thomson, 2011).

Creating an accessible space for the arts requires facilitators to consider how accessibility is achieved through cultural safety, as Micah states, "I would love for there to be land acknowledgements before arts events and exhibitions. I know that for example, one venue, had a curator who focused on Indigenous female-identifying artists, which was wonderful."

4.4 *Access Labour*

Access Labour was another theme which surfaced through the findings. *Access Labour* refers to the work people with disabilities are required to do in their own time to determine whether local spaces, programs, and venues are accessible to their specific needs. The theme will be examined with reference to Hamraie's (2016) "post-disability" ideology, to understand how organizations reproduce the notion of accessibility as having been "achieved" through basic accommodations, which leads to extra labour for disabled people to create better access practices. Once more, meaningful accessibility transpires upon communities working in grassroots ways to prioritize the complex and unique needs of those with non-normative body-minds, for which the relationships need to center their voices throughout these discussions.

To determine whether a space is accessible, the participants spoke to how they "scope it out" prior, as Patrick discussed, 'I'd ask. Just like, "where are your bathrooms?" "They're upstairs." Well, I can't go. "How many stairs is it to get in?" I always ask that. And some people are very kind and know me, so they're like before, "okay Patrick, there's that many steps". Not very often, because I don't expect people to be cognizant of that all the time, especially new people. I always make sure to scope it out first.' While Sam contacts venues beforehand to request seating accommodations to be closer to the stage, he continues to experience barriers when attempting to make those requests because "there's no seats for the blind." He says, "if you call, you know, well enough in advance, they'll make accommodations for you. You know, and then the theaters have to know to do that [open seats for the disabled]. They don't have enough seats. They don't have enough seats for the disabled to do that. They have seats for the people the wheelchairs. That's all they got." Viewing accessibility as having been "achieved" through basic accommodations (i.e., ramps), undermines disabled people's experiences with exclusion and barriers, because these are framed as fixed and static. Since organizations have implemented basic accommodations, it then leaves people with more specific needs to search for further accessibility on their own time. Theatres may not think to create seats for people with blindness, because it does not fit into concrete notions of disability and accessibility, therefore, it is then up to people like Sam to make those conditions work for their enjoyment (Hamraie, 2016).

Individual artists were also forced to engage in *Access Labour* in deciding whether to do in-person performances over the past two years, weighing the economic incentives against the potential health risks. “It was this choice of do I risk getting sick in order to work and make money and be reconnected with that part of myself that I so deeply missed?” Zoe explains. “It is neoliberal, you know, just making your losses and you know, like contemplating, almost it just, is that worth it? Okay, well, I get to do this, I might have to do this, all these things, just sort of deciding that and trying to find ways to mitigate risk while not wearing a mask and not having the layers of protection that I guess I'd become used to.”

Access Labour requires people with disabilities to plan their attendance far ahead because they must consider the immediate impacts the event may have on their health and wellbeing, as Brad attests, “I pick and choose what I go to. I used to go to everything that I could as often as I wanted to, but now I can’t. It affects me more now. It takes me more energy than it used to.” Patrick provided an example of the process he undergoes to weigh the potential benefits and risks in attending events, ‘I was with a bunch of friends, and they were like, “oh let’s go to this one venue!” I was like “I don’t really know, there’s three flights of stairs.” I’m not going to come up there, I’m not going to do it. So, I just went home, and they continued on their way.’ He states, “I mean I could’ve [done the stairs], but I would’ve been in pain afterwards and it would’ve not been worth it for like ten minutes of whatever, you know?”

The labour which comes through determining whether venues are accessible is further pronounced when organizations lack proper information regarding accessibility and accommodation in their promotional and marketing materials. Lyah disclosed her own experiences when attempting to gather information on accessibility during the pandemic, 'no one's telling me whether the spaces are safe. I think it's on me and other people who are immunocompromised or disabled or vulnerable, like elderly people, it's on us to do the work and investigate. To call the venue or email them or message them and be like, "hey, what are you doing to make this a safe space?"' Lyah spoke to the inherent problems within post-disability approaches towards accessibility, as it places added laborious burdens on people with disabilities to search for extra accommodations (Hamraie, 2016). When discussing their own experiences with inaccessibility, Wes also implores organizations to "inform your audience more about what they're going to come see, and I don't mean the plot, I mean the physical space, the volume. Like, if there's a gunshot in your show, you have to tell your audience."

In addition to being time-consuming, *Access Labour* is also a deeply draining process to navigate emotionally, as Lyah recounts, 'every time you have to conduct one of those messages, it's so anxiety inducing, because you're so worried they're going to be angry with you or you're expecting the worst answers. Like, "you can wear a mask *if you want* [italics added for emphasis]." So, it's all of this extra labour that's expected of people to do that investigation ahead of time, instead of venues putting that information outwards.' The emotional toll *Access Labour* has on people with disabilities deepens over time, which makes it harder overall to advocate for better practices and create structural changes. Patrick says, "I don't want to fight anymore. I'm always fighting just to get that [accessibility] done. It takes so long. And people just don't have the energy for that, nor should they have to. Like that's the whole thing, it shouldn’t even be a phone call. It shouldn’t be overlooked. It should never have been overlooked. And that’s the point.” These impacts discrimination takes increases the labour required for disabled people to raise awareness for and challenge discriminatory policies and practices, making all the harder for meaningful changes to be made within organizations (Hamraie, 2016).

When organizations effectively communicate the access practices which are in-place rather than forcing people with disabilities to do the draining, time-consuming work to ensure their needs are accounted for, these spaces become safer, more comfortable, and far more welcoming for all those who choose to attend. As Micah states, ‘if somebody is much more accommodating and basically feel wanted in a space, even if someone was just saying, “Hey, we have these levels of accessibility, we want to let you know that there are people of light sensitivity and stuff like that.” If someone was telling me that when I got my ticket, even though I don't necessarily have those things, I feel as if I as a person would still be like, understood a bit more by proxy almost because they recognize the larger group.’

4.5 *Virtual Consumption*

When discussing the pandemic’s impacts on disabled people’s ability to engage in the arts, the participants expressed a range of opinions on online platforms. The theme that arose was *Virtual Consumption,* which refers to the act of attending local arts events through virtual platforms, rather than the consumption that occurs through in-person interactions. Crip technoscience and TechnoAccess will be used to explore the findings, as the two concepts provide possibilities for how technological access can be strengthened through collaborative, political ways that center disability knowledge.

With regards to the social distancing measures that were enforced in 2020, Lyah enjoyed online platforms for providing opportunities to socialize and reconnect with a group of people, "it was on Twitch so there's a little chat room thing, and you can see who else was there like, Jill's here and like Carl's here. And you know it very much felt like the closest to being at an in-person show that I had experienced in a long time. And yeah, just getting to watch and listen to people, even though it wasn't in person, there's still - I guess some of it was pre-recorded and some of it was live - but still felt very immersive."

As PJ had previously struggled with attending in-person events before due to the lack of social supports for her illness, she also had positive experiences with online events. PJ states, “I watched art productions online. It was more inclusive for me. It was very easy for me to participate, with my best friend in the safety of her home, or alone at home.” Zoe also emphasized the importance in providing audiences with online options "for people who are unable to attend, even just for distance [...] will it be the same? Absolutely not, but you'll be able to see it. That's important for people."

Micah noted the many advantages in having technological access to the arts, both in how it creates a wider audience who can attend an event and for longer periods of time, as “it's like a temporal thing. Like, isn't the point of art to like, share this meaningful thing so that people can engage with it and start thinking about things in meaningful ways?” Micah’s words parallel the core tenets within crip technoscience, as Hamraie and Fritsch (2019) have argued that raising awareness for the structural inequalities which often bar disabled people from participating is an inherently political process. Friction thus needs to be created to highlight these disparities and build new opportunities for collective access for marginalized communities’ inclusion. He further shared that attending an event remotely is a far more comfortable experience, because “I can sit at my own seat in the comfort of my own home. I could get up if I needed to pause something or interrupt something. I go into cinemas and feel like I'm disturbing everybody if I need to get up and stretch or pee […] I was able to pay to be able to access these things and do them whenever I wanted for a certain amount of time."

However, other participants, particularly those with physical disabilities, were far less enthusiastic towards online events, largely because these lacked in-person interactions. As Patrick states, "I haven't really participated. I don't have the desire to. I guess I'm just used to doing it in-person. I like doing it in-person, and the social interaction that comes with it. It's not appealing." Pat also shared these sentiments, "if I'm going to be part of an art event [then] I want it to be an event. I want to be able to leave my house and go experience the event fully and authentically. I just I don't know if I like doing online ones just because I like - I appreciate the fact that they're available, but it's not why I would be involved in like an art class, because I want it to be like a personal experience for me to be part of that part of that class, so I prefer to leave the house and go to a location where I can experience it live […] because arts are very interpersonal. And you experience that differently when you're with people, you know?"

While Brad liked the virtual experience because it gave him better control over the audio, his enjoyment slowly waned within months. "I know when it happened, I was very excited. Then all of a sudden it just became overkill." He chalked the experience up to "online fatigue, because everyone was really doing it. A number of people still are. It became exhausting because every single person you knew was like, you got to come and see my show online. It gets exhausting."

Technological problems caused the participants to view online events more negatively, as PJ recalled "you miss all or half of what was going on. The audio doesn't pick it up. The camera wasn't focused over there at the time […] It was easier for me with my disorder and not as good as an art piece." Wes too encountered technical difficulties during their own shows, "One time it was set up so that I could see different people. The internet kept changing, and it was weird." They were also less drawn to online interface because it removes the emotional aspects with an audience. "I performed live four times online. That was hellish. I was before performing for hundreds of people and now it's just my camera. When you perform live, you hear every breath. You can deliver a line, and everybody will tense up and you'll feel that. Online, on the internet? Whatever." The participants' mixed responses demonstrate the need for virtual access to be developed through disabled perspectives, as practices like TechnoAccess locate them as co-creators through producing technologies to increase their inclusion within arts-based spaces and events (Temple Jones et al., 2021). When people with disabilities are excluded from these processes, facilitators are more likely to reproduce technological barriers which would have been avoided had disabled people been consulted.

A few participants noted that these problems come down to how much funding goes into online options. Brad feels "it's not as satisfying. At times, something has translated well to online, but other times, no. More often than not, filmed things theatrically don't translate, unless you're spending a lot of money." Zoe shared Brad's perspective, as she states, "maybe with more funding, we could make it not suck because my experience as an audience and as a producer...I think it depends on the media, but there is necessary aliveness that happens with performance, be it dance, theater, music, whatever it is performance, and there is a necessary reciprocity. The audience plays a part there's an exchange of energy that just is lost in digital performance."

For online platforms to be worthwhile, there needs to be better resources in place to translate those events and exhibitions digitally, as Micah states, 'You hear like "oh but it's not the same and blah blah." Like, yes, it's not the same if you don't put in any effort and just slap a couple of pictures on there. I actually think that's like a bit of a tech department - or you have somebody who's like mildly savvy at technology, and they know how to put things together. It can be a completely unique experience in and of itself. We don't have to have this - I hate this idea that like art necessarily has to be in the white cube of like an art gallery.' To make the arts accessible to people with disabilities, time and care needs to be put into technological options to enrich their experience. The example highlights the difference between "assimilating" disabled persons into an inaccessible structure designed for normative body-minds and working alongside disabled people to develop enriching and valuable ways of participating digitally, rather than centering able-bodied people who live in a world designed for them (Hamraie & Fritsch, 2019).

A few participants identified how economic barriers are reinforced through limiting events to either in-person or online access. Wes viewed events which were remote and online as blocking opportunities for lower-income groups who lack access to the required technologies. They explain "that leaves out roughly two thousand people in the downtown city core, who won't know about events or arts projects. And a lot of people who are without shelter are pretty fantastic artists. You should see the stuff they draw, the poems they write, the stories they tell. It's amazing." Recent efforts have been made to increase funding for reliable internet services in cities like Peterborough, as it was cited as a recurring problem for precarious groups (Davis & Giunta, 2022). However, during the pandemic, slow, unstable internet created difficulties with communication and networking, exacerbating challenges - particularly for artists who work in cities like Peterborough and live in rural areas. More people congregated near public libraries for internet access when lacking reliable connections, computers, or internet services (Pearson, 2020). When restricting events to online engagement organizations "basically say if you're not online you can’t participate. You know, if you’re not computer savvy, you can’t participate. It’s just sad. And the people who are most economically disadvantaged overlap with people with disabilities and overlap with people who are artists and interested in art.” Additionally, Pat noted how COVID-19 limited access to event information to online platforms, resulting in lower enthusiasm for those without technological access, as “it was always easy to be able to access like this community, but obviously right now, with the uncertainty of what is running or open than that, like, that's still probably my biggest barrier. And that sort of makes you less likely to want to do things, because I'm just not sure if it's running.”

Alternatively, these economic barriers for people with disabilities can also be reinforced through in-person only events, as Micah questions, ‘why would you want to like “oh, no, you can only access it in physical form where you have all these economic barriers.” Even taking the bus costs money, with all the transfers and everything, and a lot of people aren't comfortable going on the bus. Whether it is just for social anxiety or whether it's...for example if they have an autoimmune issue or disorder, and they're unable to be around with that large group of people in a contained space then it becomes impossible.’

4.6 *Neoliberal Compliance*

Finally, the participants touched upon their problems and concerns with local organizations’ current access practices. Local arts organizations can reproduce ableism within their approaches towards disability and accessibility, rather than challenging the inherently harmful ideologies within these measures, which then influences and upholds stigmatizing social attitudes towards people with disabilities. *Neoliberal Compliance* was the final theme which emerged from the findings. The section will reference Fritsch (2016) “neoliberal futurities” which refers to how neoliberalism conceptualizes the future through the absence of disability, as policies and practices centering individualization and personal freedoms undermine the need for care work and collective access which effectively sustain disabled people's participation in society, and ultimately, their lives. These measures thus require disabled people to either overcome their disabilities or be made vulnerable to their inevitable erasure.

Neoliberal Compliance can be enforced through accessibility measures that require people with disabilities to "prove" their condition with extensive documentation. Sam frequently encounters resistance to his requests for accommodations when attending arts events, as he says, 'if I was going to the theater and it was like, oh, "I want one of these seats for the disabled." "Do you have the documentation?" Well, this is my CIB [Canadian Institute for the Blind] card [...] maybe there has to be another system in place, because you know, we know we're not faking it, but another place will [think otherwise].' Wes also shared negative views on institutionalized documentation process, with regards to a Vulnerable Sector Check they were required to undergo to work with other people with disabilities on a performance piece, stating "what that does is criminalize us as people with disabilities. It infantilizes us, treats us like children."

Micah touched upon the inconsistencies within neoliberal institutions with regards to which types of disabilities meet their specific criteria and are constituted as legitimate disabilities. He states, "there's a very kind of neoliberal perception of what disability is in Ontario, where it has to be occurring over a long period of time. So that automatically discounts people who have short bursts of, for example, chronic pain, or other ways in which the disability might manifest." Zoe spoke to her own experience of attempting to access Ontario benefits while undergoing chemotherapy, as "what I was going through was not considered a disability even though I couldn't walk some days or move or do much of anything on my own."

Neoliberal ideologies were further reinforced throughout the pandemic, particularly with regards to recent changes in COVID-19 safety protocols. In Lyah's interview, she discussed the Ontario government's decision to remove mask mandates, noting how her organization then changed their policies to enact "mask-friendly" regulations, which gives individuals the choice as to whether to mask in public spaces. Lyah notes the hypocrisy in her organization's choice to remove enforced masking, because as a non-profit that was designed to serve the community, it was founded upon radically progressive anti-neoliberal principles. She states 'that venue and the people that run it, you know, like, the whole concept is supposed to be that it's very, like, stick into the system […] it's like really like punk you know, for-the-people kind of space but it's like, well, then I'm like, "what are we doing then if we're not making this a safe space [for vulnerable persons]?"' She continues to criticize her organization for choosing to follow the Ford government's removal of mask mandates, because the space is run by "people who were supposed to be like, *fuck the system*, [who] are now very much like, well, *we're following the system* [italics added for emphasis].' Neoliberal futurities are envisioned through disabled people's absence; therefore, individualization and personal freedoms are prioritized over collective access practices which center the inclusion of disabled people (Fritsch, 2016).

When compared to the early 2020 response to COVID-19, Lyah notes how the Ontario government promoted the slogan "we're all in this together" to encourage the general public to engage in masking and physical distancing, specifically to protect vulnerable groups. However, as of 2022, she argues "we're really not anymore" as she views the wider populace as having forgone these practices. Lyah continues, "It's each person for themselves and if you have a disability or are immunocompromised, well good luck! Stay home. Which is funny, because in 2020 all the anti-maskers were like, "why do we have to stay at home? Why don't old people and disabled people stay home?" Well, you [anti-maskers] got what you wanted now.' Andrew, who is in his mid-60s, discussed his hesitance to attend arts events during the pandemic due to the presence of people who opposed masking and vaccinating. He was "fearful and with the climate of some people - anti-vaxxers - some of these, and even close friends of mine were anti-vaxxers. I was shocked because it's [COVID-19] all over the news sites. So, I could never understand what was the reason to go against professional advice, especially in the middle of a pandemic. So that really frightened me. I didn't go [to arts events] as a result of that."

When speaking on her experiences as a performer, Zoe recalled a period wherein theatre companies began revoking their COVID-19 safety protocols for casts and crews, 'when I started working with other companies this summer, I was like, "oh my God, they're not testing us." They're not taking any precautions, like what? Why don't they care about our safety? It had become normalized for me, and I didn't realize how spoiled I was to be working at a theater that actually cares about artists and all the audience safety. So, not say that others don't, but it just was comparatively laxed and put a lot of the onus on the performers, to care for their own safety as opposed to knowing that the organization was caring for your safety. It was sort of every man for himself kind of attitude. And there were no repercussions, but there was a culture of feeling perhaps ostracized.' In neoliberal structures, the onus is placed on people with disabilities to overcome their conditions to co-exist with an inequitable structure, as these responsibilities are ultimately centered on the individual rather than larger political bodies who hold power (Fritsch, 2016).

Zoe's experience further demonstrates how these neoliberal ideologies are based within worker labor, as she states, "it really comes down to money and power dynamics and the politics that come with labour practices, because I have felt much more safe and much more in control of my autonomy as an audience member or spectator, anything like that. I have the freedom to distance, to leave, to wear my masks, all of those different things. Whereas when, you know, they're in my labour and I'm getting paid for it, I don't have that freedom or power. I have to just take a risk and pray for the best because I need that paycheck." As Fritsch (2016) writes, disabled people who can mold to inaccessible structures – whether by force or ease – will excel within these spaces, whereas those who cannot or choose not to have few places within neoliberal futurities, as the only space for disabled people requires overcoming their impairments.

To reiterate the main argument of the thesis, the findings illustrate the need for continuous and purposeful communication among organizations, artists, and audiences which centers the perspectives of people with disabilities. These conversations need to be had with the purpose of not only increasing and improving access, but prioritizing access as a pivotal experiential piece within the arts. Grassroots community organizing contrasts neoliberal institutions which seek to reproduce able-bodiedness and able-mindedness within their policies and practices, because rather than reproducing ableist ideals, it recognizes the intrinsic value people with disabilities hold as uniquely whole and complete beings.

4.7 *Conclusion*

The participants revealed their experiences with local organizations and art events, showcasing both the practices that help to increase access, and the practices that lead to people with disabilities being excluded, marginalized, and stigmatized. *Emerging Themes* highlighted the need for accessibility to be pursued reflexively and through ongoing communication between and among able-bodied and disabled communities, rather than fixed institutional approaches.

These findings will further be explored in relation to the scholarship in the upcoming *Discussion* chapter, beginning with the document analysis comparing the participants' views with the *Accessibility with Ontarians with Disabilities Act*.

Chapter 5 Discussion

The *Discussion* chapter will cover two sections, beginning with a *Document Analysis* contrasting the participants' views on access practices to the standards within the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* (AODA), followed by *Comparisons to the Literature*, examining the main findings in relation to the literature. Afterwards, I will cover the *Limitations* of the research to bring these points to a *Conclusion.* To reiterate the goals I had for the thesis, the four research questions are: 1) How do people with disabilities define "access", 2) from the perspectives of the participants, are there barriers in access to the local arts, 3) has COVID-19 impacted access to the arts in Peterborough, and if so, how, and 4) How do participant perceptions of access compare with the standards outlined in the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act*?

5.1 *Analyzing the AODA*

To further substantiate the findings, I conducted a document analysis to compare the participants' views on accessibility to the standards outlined in the AODA. Overwhelmingly, the participants either held little awareness for the AODA (and were ambiguous towards the Act's purpose and goals) or held negative opinions with the limited knowledge they had. While a few participants acknowledged that the AODA had led to positive changes for people with disabilities in Ontario, these opinions were followed by counterstatements indicating that this progress was not enough and that there was still much work to be done to improve social conditions.

These perspectives showcase the disparities between how the participants and the AODA envision meaningful access practices. In response to the creation of the *Americans with*

Disabilities Act (ADA), Canadians advocated for a provincial legislation that would improve the rights and protections of people with disabilities, seeking to dismantle the systemic barriers responsible for disabled people's absence in public sectors. After unsuccessfully negotiating with Conservative Ontario leaders to initiate a progressive mandate during the 1990s, the AODA was finally created in 2005, under the McGuinty government (Malhotra & Rusciano, 2017).

The AODA (2005) emphasizes a barrier-free approach towards accessibility, as inaccessible physical environments are viewed as creating barriers for people with disabilities in areas such as employment, transportation, and housing. The AODA therefore strives to remove these barriers through implementing accommodations (like ramps) to create a completely accessible society. The barrier-free approach contrasts the participants' views locating access as an ongoing communication process between people that is based within recognizing and validating a person's individual needs. As opposed to relying on institutions to dismantle barriers, the participants viewed access as the need to create welcoming, supportive spaces which prioritize disabled people's safety and comfortability, thus centering their participation in social life. For example, the participants cited relaxed performance as a practice which centers the desire to make arts-based spaces more accessible for people with disabilities through normalizing and encouraging them to care for their own needs during events rather than suffering in silence until the end or simply not attending. While there is value in what the AODA (2005) is attempting to accomplish through basing its goals within barrier-free ideologies, the views expressed by the participants indicate that for these practices to be effective, the Act's understanding of access needs to extend far beyond physical and/or social barriers within public spaces.

Since the AODA (2005) is written as an organizational guide to help and encourage businesses, industries, and non-profits to improve their accessibility measures, it is perhaps unsurprising that the 10 people interviewed for the research had limited knowledge on the Act's purpose and overall effectiveness. A lack of understanding of the Act would lead to differences in their perspectives on access when compared to the AODA’s approach towards accessibility. Nevertheless, it is significant that the participants cited community-based care practices as the basis for meaningful access over barrier-oriented approaches. I would argue these disparities indicate that the barrier-free approach within the Act is inadequate in meeting disabled people’s unique needs because it centers institutions that represent able-bodiedness and able-mindedness as sites for meaningful change rather than emphasizing the need to listen to and engage with disabled communities.

For example, the AODA was criticized for failing to acknowledge and address the diverse range of conditions which exists for people with disabilities, not only in excluding certain types of disabilities, but also through reducing the criteria for "disability" to a permanent, ongoing state. There are various kinds of disabilities which can be experienced in temporal bursts, such as chronic pain, illness, and fatigue, yet are unaccounted for in the Act’s criteria for “disability”, which is defined as, “a range of visible and invisible conditions that may have been present from birth, caused by an accident, or developed over time.” (Kovac, 2018, para. 3; 2020). Through limiting "disability" to sustained periods of time, the Act fails to consider how these conditions can fluctuate and change, as one's symptoms can develop, disappear, and come back all within a relatively quick period of time (Wendell, 2001). These definitions are also based within a colonial framing of disability, as it makes no reference to Indigenous forms of difference (Lovern, 2022).

As noted in the *Emerging Themes* chapter, a participant recalled her own challenges when seeking resources through the AODA because her condition failed to meet the criteria for a disability, despite being unable to walk and stand up on her own for periods of time. I would argue that by deciding which groups are constituted as *really disabled* the AODA reproduces neoliberal ideologies, because neoliberalism individualizes disability through designating which specific impairments are deserving of state-facilitated economic resources, narrowing these to the specificities of their embodied characteristics to determine an individual's perceived worthiness (Fritsch, 2013). The AODA therefore reinforces disabled people's poor social and economic position through marginalizing those with non-normative body-minds for not being "disabled enough" to receive government-mandated supports.

Several participants also identified safety measures for COVID-19 to be a gap in local access practices, as Zoe, Andrew, and Lyah – who are all immunocompromised - expressed feeling unsafe due to the lack of enforced/encouraged COVID-19 precautions by organizations. There are zero references to the pandemic within the Act's amendments. While the AODA website circulated newspaper articles on the pandemic throughout 2020 and 2021 to spread information on the virus and government-mandated safety measures, less than five articles were shared in early 2022. As of 2023, the mandate has not been updated to include any recommendations for safety measures, such as mask-wearing, COVID-19 vaccines, physical distancing, or sanitizing, even though the Act was written to encourage better accessibility standards for businesses, organizations, and nonprofits (AODA, 2005).

In lacking recommendations for COVID-19, a few participants noted themselves how neoliberal ideologies are reinforced in placing and intensifying the onus on the individual to care for their own health (i.e., masking) rather than encouraging organizations to enforce these measures to ensure disabled people's safety. While the AODA cites their purpose as being to create an accessible society by 2025, their standards were clearly created in pre-COVID circumstances (Kovac, 2018). As the Act never mentions “COVID-19”, “masking”, or “pandemic”, it appears that rather than adapting to a post-COVID world, the AODA (2005) erases that world entirely, which effectively denies the threats people with disabilities continue to face in their daily lives. The AODA’s lack of COVID recommendations can be linked to eugenic ideologies, wherein disabled people are viewed as inferior to able-bodied people, thus their lives are considered expendable due to being designated as having less value as a group. Canadian eugenics organizations were concerned with preserving the dominance of white, Anglo-Saxon, able-bodied people and subjected disabled (or “feeble-minded”) groups to poor living conditions with the intention of destroying the genetic traits linked to their disabilities (Kelly et al., 2021). The failure to enforce COVID-19 measures to protect vulnerable persons therefore reproduces eugenic logic in effectively designating disabled people’s lives as disposable through inaction.

People with disabilities are one of the groups most vulnerable to experiencing severe illness and/or death upon contracting COVID-19 (Doonan, 2021; Rice et al., 2021). They are also susceptible to living below the poverty line and working minimum wage jobs (Currier, 2018; Gignac, 2021), which means that contracting COVID-19 would place an even larger strain on their financial circumstances, as they cannot afford the option to take time off work to recover (at least not without putting themselves into an even more precarious financial situation). The Act privileges a COVID-free world which may never once again be realized, and in doing so, indulges in what Hamraie (2016) refers to as post-disability ideology through ignoring the ways in which a significant portion of disabled people who continue to be vulnerable to developing life-altering conditions upon contracting the virus. It is unclear as to whether the AODA consulted people with disabilities on matters related to COVID-19, but nevertheless, it exists as a glaring gap within the Act's approach to accessibility standards.

In 2023, Ontario continues to grapple with high rates of infections, particularly as new strains develop and spread with so few masking, distancing, and testing measures in place. While COVID-19 presents a danger to disabled people's lives, the Act privileges a world in which these threats are obsolete, despite rising hospitalization rates and alarming spikes in virus cases (CBC News, 2022), all while the provincial government seeks to dismantle and privatize the public health care system for profits. The AODA mandate begs the question: for whom is this fully accessible society intended to serve? As it stands, the answer appears to be the few who are considered to be "healthy" citizens.

While the AODA strives to create an accessible world for Ontarians, the problems within the Act's barrier-free approach appears to demonstrate a lack of proper consultation from people with disabilities, resulting in ineffective practices that fail to ensure their full participation in public spaces. The upcoming section will draw comparisons between the main interview findings and the related literature, beginning with an overview of the various approaches considered meaningful regarding access practices, outlining suggestions for arts organizations to improve their accessibility measures.

5.2 *Comparisons to the Literature*

In the *Discussion* section, I will delve further into the findings to make comparisons to the literature. The following sub-sections include *Meaningful Access Practices, Critiquing Accommodations, Intersectional Approaches, The Importance in Options*, and *The Need for Care*. I arrived at the sub-sections after contemplating ways to answer the four research questions, drawing upon the overarching themes within the findings to tie these titles back to the research areas I gathered information on through the participant interviews. Afterwards, I will conclude the chapter by exploring the limitations of research such as the inconsistencies and disadvantages in the sample size and sampling methods, as well as briefly outlining recommendations for future studies which includes more diverse participant samples and an inclusion of arts facilitators.

5.2.1 *Meaningful Access Practices*

I interpreted the interview findings to showcase how the participants' understanding of meaningful access practices aligns with the main tenets of Carmen Papalia's (2018) conceptual framework of Open Access. The basic principle encompassing Open Access is meaningful communication between and among communities, whether that be communication between able-bodied people and people with disabilities, organizations communicating with audiences, etc. When a disabled person enters a public space, they are incredibly vulnerable because those structures are not designed to recognize or support their body-minds. Communicating access practices with disabled people not only signifies that their presence is wanted within that space, but that their needs are being considered and prioritized. As Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018) argues, when supportive and welcoming communities are created, people with disabilities are free to be their unique and complete selves.

When organizations lack information to communicate their accessibility practices, people with disabilities are required to go through draining and time-consuming Access Labour. Arts organizations would benefit from establishing and advertising clear and comprehensive access guides on social media websites. As per Rice et al. (2021), access guides hold basic information on the venue's accessibility practices, potential triggers during a show, and create opportunities for audience feedback on ways to improve these measures. Access guides can extend beyond disabilities to ensure marginalized groups, such as women, LGBTQ persons, Indigenous people, black people, and people of colour are comfortable entering these spaces. When organizations focus on addressing and catering to audience members' needs, the environment becomes more harmonious simply through expressing care and concern for people (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018).

Communication requires communities to build and sustain trusting relationships with other members. For people with disabilities, expressing their needs can be a vulnerable, intimidating process. However, establishing relationships with people who strive to tackle ableism helps to create an environment wherein they feel empowered and safe. As per Mingus (2011), access intimacy is essential to these relationships, in helping empower disabled people to disclose their perspectives and experiences. For example, Andrew's arts-based group prioritizes physical accessibility when determining their meeting places, to ensure their member who lives with a physical disability can comfortably and easily navigate the building. Intimacy was created through prioritizing accessibility because that member's participation is meaningful to the group. Therefore, maintaining supportive, trusting mutual relationships within communities is essential to forging access intimacy.

Open Access also emphasizes the importance of centering people with disabilities in the decision-making process (Papalia, 2018). The participants too highlighted these efforts as needing to be led and centered by people with different types of disabilities, to avoid tokenizing their perspectives. When people with disabilities are meaningfully represented – not tokenized – these issues are better responded to because their body-minds are valued as a source of embodied knowledge. When access practices are determined by able-bodied people, their limited personal experience with disability in their own lives leads to the implementation of poor and inadequate measures. Papalia (2018) argues that people with disabilities need to be centered in these efforts, because they are "the people who hold knowledge about support and accessibility […] who are practicing accessibility all of the time" (para. 16). Able-bodied people lack the embodied knowledge required for making decisions on access measures, as these discrepancies lead them to either tokenize or overlook people with disabilities along the designing, marketing, and performance stages. For Watkin (2017), people with disabilities need to be consulted across each stage of the planning of a show to avoid top-down approaches, which places able-bodied people at the top of the decision-making process, while disabled people are below, lacking any say or influence.

Care work within communities is needed to make up for gaps in government-mandated resources (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018). The participants were aware that physical access – such as ramps, elevators, and lifts – require the use of government funds. The arts events which take place in downtown Peterborough-Nogojiwanong were noted to frequently be held in older, physically inaccessible heritage buildings. While new buildings are required to meet the standards outlined in the Building Code with features such as universal washrooms and power door operators, older buildings have no such requirements to meet these codes (Accessibility in Ontario's Building Code, 2021). To renovate these buildings to be accessible, the costs would be allocated to the building owners to implement these features. While the AODA has recommended that the Ontario government pursue a tax incentive for businesses to help fund renovations for older buildings, currently, the Act's policies only extend to new buildings and buildings that are in the process of undergoing renovations, not older buildings (Kovac, 2020).

The participants’ suggestions to hold events in outdoor spaces – when the weather conditions are agreeable – is an example of collective care providing a possible solution to these problems, wherein communities work to ensure that no one’s body-mind excludes them from participation (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018). There are several advantages to holding events in outdoor spaces, as it reduces the physical barriers which come from staircases, steps, and narrow hallways, and provides audiences with their choice of seating. Audiences and attendees would be able to come and go as they please, reducing potential concerns about appearing rude or disruptive when needing to leave during a performance. The outdoors would be safer than a confined indoor venue in regards to COVID-19, as it would allow for better airflow. It may also further reduce economic barriers in allowing poor and unhoused persons to access these spaces more comfortably and easily. Outdoor spaces provide audiences with far more control in determining how they would like to engage with the environment where the event takes place than indoor spaces, as these are oftentimes rigid and confining. However, as Kafer (2013) notes, outdoor spaces can also act as obstacles to access, as people with disabilities are frequently denied access to outside areas due to unevenness, roughness, and a lack of on-site accessible features in the environment (i.e., accessible bathrooms, clear pathways for wheelchair users, etc.). Disabled people are still required to do extensive research prior to attending to ensure that the space is fully accessible to their needs and that accommodation will be available to them at their request (Devine, 2015). Both Kafer (2013) and Devine (2015) have also noted how disabled people are poorly treated when requesting accommodations, which Kafer describes as an oppositional ableist response oftentimes masked with faux environmental concerns. While outdoor spaces provide a potential solution to inaccessible venues, organizers still need to consult disabled people within the planning stages to avoid reproducing stigmatizing interactions and ableist barriers.

Furthermore, I believe these findings demonstrate the need to integrate relaxed performance into local shows, to reduce the stigma attached to violating traditional standards for theatre etiquette, as these are defined by able-bodied and able-minded capabilities, leaving no flexibility for those who cannot comfortably function under these expectations. LaMarre et al. (2021) emphasize that relaxed performance advantages all body-minds through centering disabled people's needs, because it challenges conventional norms that able-people may also struggle with meeting. In allowing audience members to stand up, leave, consume beverages, the space becomes more welcoming through supporting people's basic bodily needs, regardless of whether they have a disability (Rice et al., 2021). Arts organizations in Peterborough-Nogojiwanong, such as Public Energy and Mysterious Entity, have already integrated relaxed performance into their productions to positive reactions (LaMarre et al., 2019; Woodcock, 2020). Relaxed performance is thus a meaningful access practice which has shown to be beneficial and enjoyable to local audiences.

The participants' experiences with inaccessible events also further showcases the importance in pursuing relaxed performance for theatre, dance, poetry, and even music shows. A few participants disclosed traumatic memories of needing to leave a venue during a performance due to being triggered by the content of the shows or to attend to their health needs. The stigma associated with leaving a show during a performance can create a deeply traumatizing experience for people with disabilities, regardless of whether the stigma is real or perceived. Wes, for example, was punished by the venue owners for leaving during a performance, as they are banned from attending future shows at the venue until they apologize for "causing a scene" despite having an involuntary autistic response to a triggering noise. Their reaction defied the traditional standards of theatre etiquette to remain seated until the show's intermission or ending. After being triggered emotionally, PJ also removed herself from the space, and although she never mentioned facing any consequences for leaving, she still experienced immense anxiety, fear, and guilt for doing so.

The two participants' experiences further demonstrate the need to create emotional access, as Gratton (2020) recommends. Gratton coined emotional access to describe interpersonal practices that help create a welcoming culture wherein people with disabilities are emotionally supported in art spaces, through practices such as employing support workers. Emotional access encourages them to continue to engage in the arts, particularly if they have previous negative experiences with prejudice or discrimination.

Through normalizing these actions as part of the in-person experience, relaxed performance also benefits the performers, crew, and organizers in reducing the pressure to ensure their show is free from disruptions or distractions. Prior to the pandemic, local arts organizations were already experimenting with utilizing relaxed performance as a feature within their shows, a choice that was received with positive reactions from their audiences (LaMarre et al., 2019). Continuing to integrate relaxed performance as an access practice will therefore help people with disabilities to engage with the arts and may improve audiences' overall enjoyment and comfort levels. In creating an environment in which people are allowed to attend to their needs, local arts organizations can help to weave a more comfortable and harmonious space for audiences, performers, crews, and organizers.

These are a few suggestions which may help to improve access to the local arts for people with disabilities in Peterborough-Nogojiwanong. The findings demonstrated the importance of investing in practices based in Open Access, as relaxed performance, emotional access, and other creative practices were created and developed to center disabled people's embodied knowledge. In the next section, I will explore how the implementation of "accommodations" reinforces social and structural barriers to the arts as solutions led by able-bodied perspectives on accessibility.

5.2.2 *Critiquing Accommodations*

The participant interviews revealed the various physical, economic, and social barriers impeding upon disabled people's access to the arts, which serve to hinder their capacity to attend and participate in local programs and events. When access is viewed as being created through the implementation of accommodations to overcome barriers, these efforts undermine the need to challenge larger structural inequalities that reinforce the ableist ideologies upholding expectations for able-bodiedness and able-mindedness.

The findings were consistent with the studies conducted by Collins et al. (2022) and Gratton (2020), which showcased how financial obstacles emerge before the show takes place. While the pay-what-you-can (PWYC) option functions to decrease these economic barriers, it does not negate all costs when travelling to events, such as transportation and parking fees. Financial access has to do with more than the cost of a show; income continues to be a particular problem impacting people with disabilities, because they are disproportionately economically disadvantaged group in Canada (Wall, 2017). For example, people with disabilities are far more likely to become impoverished or homeless than non-disabled people, making the cost of attending arts events (which includes the pre-show costs), much higher for this demographic (Johner, 2013).

Furthermore, Wes also noted how pre-event physical barriers prevent disabled people from travelling in-person to attend shows. These examples also correlate with Collins et al. (2022) and Gratton's (2020) articles, because obstacles such as inaccessible, crowded buses, ramp-less entrances, and a lack of accessible parking spaces can all determine whether a physically disabled person is able to attend. The schedule of public transportation also presents problems due to scheduling and route issues, as well as safety risks when travelling in the evenings. When brainstorming ways to make local arts more accessible to people with disabilities, organizations should consider devoting further time and resources towards pre-event barriers, as people with disabilities are still required to navigate convoluted and costly able-bodied systems before getting to the venues that prioritize access. A solution could be to offer a carpooling program for those who depend on these systems. Carpooling would allow people to avoid the dangers of travelling alone and may reduce the financial costs of busing or cab services. Another solution could be to provide a stipend for people who may be more comfortable using cabs to help cover those fees. These options would help reduce transportation barriers that may arise when navigating convoluted bus systems or attempting to find accessible parking, while also reducing any financial burdens on the individual (Gratton, 2020).

Stigmatization also plays a large role in reinforcing barriers to the arts, as the participants expressed their concern for appearing rude, awkward, and/or disinterested when requesting accommodations or attending to their access needs during events, particularly while watching performance pieces. Their anxieties extended beyond the immediate show, as participants voiced their fear of being barred from future events within the venue due to potentially upsetting the performers and organizers. As Collins et al. (2022) and Ludwig (2012) have noted, stigmatizing experiences can influence whether disabled people are comfortable returning to venues again in the future, as these interactions can be deeply traumatizing, particularly when the organizers respond negatively to them for attending to their health and/or wellbeing. When an organization subtlety undermines, ignores, or diminishes people's disabilities, these serve to uphold normative expectations for how people can behave, as well as which types of body-minds are desired within a space (Collins et al., 2022).

The participants with non-visible disabilities also highlighted their encounters with strangers, acquaintances, and friends questioning and invalidating their conditions. For example, Brad expressed his personal frustrations with people questioning his chronic pain because he *looks fine*. These findings were consistent with the literature, as Kattari et al. (2018) and Wendell (2001) detailed how pervasive these types of micro-aggressions are for people with non-visible disabilities, who experience heightened demands to "prove" their disabled identity. These deeply ableist reactions increase disabled people's reluctance to ask for accommodations, which can greatly reduce their overall enjoyment while attending events or can lead them to simply not attending to avoid stigmatizing interactions. When requesting accommodations, Sam encounters organizers scrutinizing his blindness, largely because he lacks the physical markers associated with disability, such as a seeing-eye dog or a walking cane (Wendell, 2001). The stigmatizing responses he receives compels him to hide his blindness to "pass" as able-bodied, largely due to the bias that people falsely claim to be disabled to receive special benefits (Kattari et al., 2018; Wendell, 2011). Therefore, a lack of proper education and awareness leads to these social barriers being reinforced through the very accommodations that were designed to improve these conditions.

Furthermore, the stare upholds normative expectations for body-minds through functioning as a form of social punishment for stigmatized behaviors. The stare reflects the status quo, exemplifying which groups hold power and which are powerless through expressing a negative facial response. As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2005) writes, staring has been utilized to deviantize non-normative body-minds since the freak shows, which enabled able-bodied audiences to consume marginalized groups' physical and mental features through the stare for economic incentives. In Patrick's interview, he expressed hesitance with using lifts because it turns his condition into a spectacle. The prolonged gaze is imbued with ableism through fixating on people with disabilities as the Other, aggressively lingering on the features which differentiate them from able-bodied people, not unlike the fetishization which drew audiences to freak shows (Garland-Thomson, 2005). Several participants noted how staring punishes people with disabilities for violating normative audience etiquette during shows, whether by audience members, performers, or organizers. For example, leaving the space may require standing up to move across several seated audience members in the row, sometimes even walking close to the stage to access the closest exits. The stare can be excruciating to the extent that a few participants even recalled times in which they neglected their health to avoid bringing unwanted attention to themselves. Staring thus designates people with non-normative body-minds as abnormal and strange in public spaces, because these are environments designed to cater to and normalize able-bodiedness and able-mindedness.

Overall, the interview findings yielded frequent criticisms with the use of "accommodations" as a means to overcome these barriers to the arts. As the literature showcases (Fritsch, 2013; Hamraie, 2016), the problem with accommodations remains in their application as a quick fix to larger structural inequalities. The participants voiced their criticisms towards organizations who utilize cheap and easy accommodations to appear accessible (for performative purposes) over sustained and in-depth consultation with people with disabilities. Hamraie (2016) noted that accommodations quickly dissolve into “one-size-fits-all" gestures that can result in marginalizing and excluding people whose needs are more specific and cannot be resolved through band-aid solutions. Even when implemented with good intentions, accommodations are utilized to integrate people with disabilities within an inaccessible structure, rather than attempting to change the design of the structure to center non-normative body-minds. When these solutions fail to be accessible to each person’s disability, the person is viewed as the problem rather than the accommodations; this response reproduces the logic of medical model in framing the inaccessibility people with disabilities face as inevitable due to the conditions of their body-minds, further reducing and erasing the need to create potential changes which could come through challenging unequal structures (Marks, 1997).

Therefore, the problem with one-size-fits-all accommodation is that it lacks the creativity and imagination required to pursue the structural changes needed to achieve meaningful accessibility. However, organizations may not have the means to pursue more meaningful access measures due to obstacles such as a lack of economic resources. Quick and easy accommodations may be the only way many organizations can create accessibility. Nevertheless, the participants viewed access as requiring ongoing and meaningful communication with disabled people, rather than tokenizing or ignoring their voices to employ temporary fixes. When organizations engage with audiences to communicate these matters, the participants attested to feeling safer and more comfortable within the space, even despite any barriers. The upcoming section will thus focus on the intersectional themes within the findings, to further understand how effective access practices are aligned with an increased awareness towards race, sexuality, and gender.

5.2.3 *Intersectional Approaches*

In this section, I will discuss how themes related to race, sexuality, and gender arose in the findings, with regards to how this relates to the literature. The findings further demonstrate the need to engage in Open Access practices, as these problems primarily arose through a lack of communication with disabled people who hold multiple marginalized identities when facilitating arts programs and events.

The participant interviews showcased the need for arts organizations to base their access practices within a decolonial framework. Meaningful access requires organizations to have a cultural awareness for Indigenous people's lived experiences with colonization to make these spaces safe and welcoming, particularly when led by white settlers. Indigenous people who live with difference experience unique obstacles when attempting to access resources for their conditions, as racializing, colonizing, and ableist ideologies are interconnected within social structures to reinforce the white settler, able-bodied status quo (Velarde, 2018). Lyah provided an anecdote concerning the problems with holding events in local churches, because these are institutions with deeply violent colonial legacies and are responsible for causing complex cultural and generational trauma for Indigenous peoples. While churches may be physically accessible, they are culturally inaccessible and may alienate various groups of people from attending. Non-Indigenous organizers should focus on decolonizing the arts, which can begin with land acknowledgements to recognize the lands they are residing on and to meditate on these histories, as well as through including and centering Indigenous artists when possible. Decolonization needs to be prioritized in the production and presentation of events, centering Indigenous knowledges to improve upon current practices and make these spaces more accessible.

The two participants who are queer identifying provided a nuanced perspective on how disability overlaps with sexuality, particularly with regards to the invisibility of these identities. While neither participant mentioned encountering marginalization in the arts because of their sexuality, Micah brought up the subtle ways in which queerness and disability are “checked” within public spaces, even when these places are relatively accepting and welcoming. While in public, Micah’s queerness is looked over and questioned because he wears feminine clothes, especially when with his female partner. Similarly, Micah’s disability is questioned when accessing resources because his conditions are not readily visible. Like queerness, disability is expected to conform to clear and obvious physical markers, like wheelchairs (Fritsch, 2014). When these do not, they are met with judgement and skepticism for contradicting normative expectations for how people should look and behave (Clare, 2001). Even while body-minds can be the sites for resistance to hegemonic norms, these actions still face stigmatization for violating sexual and able-bodied standards, even in progressive social circles.

Gender dynamics can also be deduced from the participants’ experiences when examining the presence of paternalistic attitudes towards people with disabilities. As Clare (2017) and Kafer (2013) note, people with physical and cognitive disabilities are frequently reduced to being child-like and passive, rather than people with autonomous control and agency. These views partly derive from the coding of disability as feminine, due to being categorized as a weakness, inferior to male able-bodiedness (Garland-Thomson, 2002). The experience Wes encountered in being required to undergo a Vulnerable Sector Check to participate in an artistic opportunity exemplifies how people with disabilities are infantilized through institutions. A Vulnerable Sector Check is a paid process by which the police run a check of a person’s background to search for any previous criminal activity. The Check is typically used for people who are working in roles assumed to hold power over vulnerable persons, which includes disabled people (Peterborough Police Service, n.d.). To perform in the show, Wes was required to have the Check done, despite having worked one-on-one with the disabled performers they were doing the piece with multiple times before. While people with disabilities may be a vulnerable group, it is important to note that a Vulnerable Sector Check is an institutionalized process which reflects upon the organization that requires the documentation rather than the person purchasing the screening for themselves. Wes viewed the Vulnerable Persons Check as both infantilizing and criminalizing people with disabilities, because it simultaneously designates them as a vulnerable group in need of protection while also coding neurodivergent persons like Wes as potentially dangerous. The Check also creates additional economic barriers which may hinder them from pursuing their own involvement in the arts, because a *Vulnerable Sector Check* costs money, and people with disabilities in Peterborough-Nogojiwanong are a deeply economically marginalized group (Currier, 2018). These institutional processes reproduce further obstacles to participating in the arts while simultaneously infantilizing and criminalizing people with disabilities.

These paternalistic attitudes can further be seen in PJ’s experience in the email thread with event organizers. PJ was asked to present her literary work for an event alongside other local authors. When she expressed hesitance to participate (for unspecified reasons), the other organizers began to speculate on whether she was “capable” of participating due to her mental illness and if they should consult her throughout the planning process. Unbeknownst to these organizers, PJ was attached to the email thread and could read their messages. To reiterate Garland-Thomson's (2005) quote, women with disabilities are frequently “cast in the collective cultural imagination as inferior, lacking, excessive, incapable, unfit, and useless.” (p. 1567).

Women with disabilities are infantilized because able-bodied people view them as lacking agency and decision-making capacities. Though PJ was uncertain of whether she would be participating in the literary show, the organizers concluded her indecision was due to her mental illness rather than any other factor, such as COVID-19, and took it upon themselves to publicly question and debate whether she could participate, rather than simply involve her throughout the decision-making process to keep her informed. Several people assumed she was incapable of making the decision to participate, which ostracized her through assuming she was unfit to make those choices based on their own perceptions of her capacities. No one is better suited to examine their own capabilities than women who live with disabilities, because they are consistently being undermined through their gender and body-minds. Even while the organizers may have had good intentions, their actions were informed by patriarchal and ableist biases, which led to them alienating and ostracizing the person they sought to include.

Gender, race, and sexuality are thus all large factors in understanding how disabled people’s engagement with access ranges based on their identities. These findings were consistent with the literature regarding the ways in which ableism intersects with colonization, heteronormativity, and patriarchy to produce complex and nuanced experiences in arts-based spaces. In the next section, I will examine how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted disabled people's abilities to engage with the arts and the ways in which these changes created new possibilities for accessibility.

5.2.4 *The Importance of Options*

Among the 10 participants, there was a diverse range of opinions regarding the advantages of holding events on online platforms. The interviewees overall appreciated having options as to how they could participate in the arts, whether through attending in-person or virtually. When organizations create in-person only events, the lack of an online component may alienate potential audiences from participating altogether, because it reinforces physical, social, cultural, sensory, and economic barriers. For people with disabilities, their condition(s) can change from day-to-day and can worsen at any given time, particularly for those who experience pain, illness, etc. (Wendell, 2001). Implementing an online component to in-person events would therefore reduce the potential stress that comes with cancelling plans and re-selling tickets, all while allowing audiences to experience the event within a comfortable setting.

The technological problems the participants encountered when attending online events diminished their enjoyment with the overall experience, so much so that it determined their willingness to attend events online in the future. The findings were consistent with the literature (Aydos et al., 2021; Kersten-Parrish, 2021; La Rose et al., 2022) detailing the various problems that can arise when transitioning the arts to online platforms. Glitches, poor audio, and other technological errors can be large determining factors in disabled people's likelihood to engage in virtual access, as the participants found these deeply unsettling, disorienting, and triggering, particularly for those with mental and sensory disabilities. Avoiding or reducing these issues is essential to making the arts accessible for people with disabilities. Brad and Zoe, both of whom have years of experience working in theatre productions, expressed the need for increased funding to better translate live performances to online platforms. According to these two participants, while arts facilitators seek to ensure that online options are enjoyable for audiences, organizations need the funding to put their time and resources into these platforms to make online options not only enjoyable, but mentally and emotionally comfortable.

However, the participants noted how online access becomes an economic and technological barrier when the arts can *only* be accessed virtually, as was expressed by La Rose et al. (2022). Those without computers or phones are less able to participate in the arts, because not only do they lack the technologies required to participate, they also are unable to access information on the events when these are solely advertised on social media websites, as was done during the pandemic. While people could go to public spaces, such as the library, to attend the events, they may be unaware that these are happening without a connection to the digital world. Wes noted how these practices during the pandemic prevented low-income and unhoused persons from accessing the arts, while Pat detailed his own difficulties with understanding what and when arts programs and events were running.

Furthermore, several participants noted how online platforms lose the essential "aliveness" inherent to in-person events, as the connection between the performers and the audience is removed through virtual attendance. Their solution was to increase arts organizations' funding to improve the quality of digital recordings, through hiring skilled photographers/videographers, higher-quality cameras, multiple takes with different angles, etc. For exhibitions and galleries, Micah noted how a savvy tech department could create an interesting and appealing way to interact with art through virtual platforms, potentially leading to creative opportunities to make these experiences enriching and unique. Through funding virtual access, local arts organizations could attract larger and more diverse audiences to their events, which could increase their revenue and help to invest in the digital components of their pieces (Rice et al., 2021). Virtual access gives people with disabilities the option to choose how to engage with the arts to suit their own physical, sensory, cognitive, cultural, and economic needs. Those who may lack access to the required technologies or prefer the arts to be in-person will be able to attend live, while others who are more comfortable attending virtually would be able to do so in a setting of their choice. All people can benefit when disability culture becomes mainstream.

The pandemic provided opportunities to improve access to the arts for people with disabilities through shifting audience engagement onto virtual platforms. However, limiting access to either online or in-person options reinforces the physical, social, and technological barriers that hindered people with disabilities from participating prior to the pandemic. Offering audience members with a choice as to how they would like to attend and/or participate allows them to enjoy a show or exhibition in ways that are suited to their own needs. The next section will explore the neoliberal ideologies embedded within organizations' negligence to enforce COVID-19 measures, as their collective inaction reproduces "choice" narratives, necropolitics, and the ableist ideal within workplace policies.

5.2.5 *The Need for Care*

As noted in the critique of the AODA mandate, there are discrepancies between the Act and disabled people's views effective access practices. *The Need for Care* arose in the participants' desire for access measures to go beyond the basic standards outlined in the AODA and be grounded in recognizing, validating, and prioritizing disabled people's presence within arts-based spaces. The participants' needs were most prominent when discussing matters related to the lack of safety measures for COVID-19, particularly with regards to the Ontario government's policy changes over the past year that oversaw the removal of masking and testing mandates.

Zoe and Lyah's personal anecdotes describing their struggles with participating in the local arts during the pandemic as immunocompromised people reveal how COVID-19 safety measures are grounded in care for people with disabilities. Spaces lacking these measures privilege those who are "healthy" citizens while providing disabled persons with the "choice" to either risk their health or stay home. Minich (2016) notes how personal freedoms and responsibilities are centered in neoliberal ideologies, particularly as “choice” serves as an illusion to mask how the capitalist economic system leaves people with few options. Zoe and Lyah recounted the differences in engaging with local arts organizations that enforced COVID-19 safety measures, noting how they felt safe and cherished within these spaces because these measures signified that the facilitators wanted and prioritized their presence during events. However, the few organizations that chose to disregard regulations were perceived by the participants as devaluing the contributions they, as people with disabilities, can bring to these spaces through viewing them as expendable. An absence of COVID-19 safety protocol signifies that able-bodied normalcy takes precedence over disabled people’s lives, which "privileges able-bodied and minded-ness [and] creates social spaces only fit for normative citizens.” (Goodley & Lawthom, 2019, p. 245). The participants’ experiences with navigating these spaces alludes to how able-bodiedness and able-mindedness can be centered when organizations lack measures for COVID-19.

These neoliberal practices regarding COVID-19 also reflect the necropolitics rhetoric Grunawalt (2021) outlines, which places value on able-bodied citizens having access to public spaces with zero masking, testing, and physical distancing measures. In exploring how disabled people were treated throughout the pandemic, Grunawalt utilizes Mbembe’s (2003) original concept of necropolitics, which describes the process in which colonial societies designate certain groups – typically those who lack political and economic power – as disposable to uphold the power of the sovereign ruling class. These politics prioritize able-bodied privileges over disabled people’s lives, as vulnerable groups become more exposed to contracting the virus, rather than require organizations to enforce measures to prevent the virus from spreading (Grunawalt, 2021). Necropolitics also facilitates the social pressure for people with disabilities to avoid public spaces, confining and isolating people with disabilities to their homes. In lacking restrictions and mask mandates, organizations are reinforcing the notion that vulnerable people are inherently disposable when compared to “healthy” bodies, for which their absence in society – and death – is an inevitable consequence to achieve normalcy for able-bodied citizens (Grunawalt, 2021).

Zoe’s experiences as an immunocompromised worker further revealed how Goodley and Lawthom’s (2019) “ableist ideal” is reproduced within arts organizations. To reiterate, the ideal is premised upon valuing workers for their unabating, continuous dedication to the workplace above all else, including their own health and wellbeing. As Zoe detailed in her interview, she was encouraged to continue working in a theatre production despite their lack of safety protocols, wherein performers were pressured to be unmasked in crowded indoor spaces. Artists depend upon these productions for wages and have limited power in protesting these practices as workers. People with disabilities, who are already far more disproportionately economically disadvantaged than able-bodied people, have even less power to negotiate or turn down work (Wall, 2017). While Zoe expressed her fear of working in productions with no masking or testing regulations, the potential of losing income would’ve placed her in too vulnerable of a financial position to refuse. The threat of contracting a severe illness contains even more dire implications for people with disabilities, because sickness could impact their future work prospects. When lacking sick days, the expectation to come into work contagious – even while masked – exemplifies the toxic work culture the ableist ideal breeds (Goodley & Lawthom, 2019).

Care work – that is, the work that requires community-based interdependence, wherein people with disabilities are supported and cared for in relationships built upon mutual reciprocity - inherently conflicts with the neoliberal systems that are based within principles such as individualism and independence. As the participants vocalized through their COVID-19 related insights, accessibility standards within mandates such as AODA cannot provide meaningful access for people with non-normative body-minds because these standards are entrenched within valuing personal freedoms and choice, rather than pursuing care practices based within valuing vulnerable groups. The research therefore illustrates the impetus for communities to build relationships with people with disabilities centered on the mutual need for ongoing reciprocal care.

The participants who expressed their concerns for COVID-19 and were more likely to advocate for safety protocols were either aging or immunocompromised, making them more susceptible to severe illness upon contracting the virus, which aligns with Doonan (2021) and Grunawalt’s articles (2021). However, people with physical disabilities were less inclined to express COVID-19 related anxieties, contrasting with Gignac et al. (2021). The physically disabled participants cited in-person socialization as an overarching factor that drew them to the arts. Their subdued views towards the virus may have simply been due to their desire for in-person interactions despite the risks. Nevertheless, the divergence showcases the importance of researchers gathering a range of people with various types of disabilities when exploring topics related to accessibility, as these opinions differ even within a relatively small group of participants. I will review the limitations of this research in the upcoming section, followed by my concluding thoughts.

5.3 *Contributions to the Conceptual Framework*

The findings contribute to the literature by showcasing the relevance in framing meaningful accessibility through Carmen Papalia's (2018) concept of Open Access. There is significance in showcasing how disabled people’s perceptions of meaningful access align with

Open Access, because it reinforces and strengthens the need to create ongoing communication concerning people's specific needs within communities. This research indicates people with disabilities also desire the integration of Open Access principles within their local community, reinforcing the need for disability culture as it extends far beyond the parameters of academic discourse. Working to build these types of relationships therefore challenges the neoliberal institutions upholding able-bodied ideals through hyper-individualized policies and practices, which further sever the potential ties and connections within communities that are required for meaningful access to take place (Fritsch, 2016). The findings may also hold significance for conceptual frameworks within critical access studies through illustrating how Access Labour functions as a barrier for people with disabilities who seek to engage in arts-based spaces (Hamraie, 2021).

Furthermore, I believe the findings can contribute to local scholarship through showcasing how accessibility can be effectively enacted through practical means. Ontario-based research centers such as Project Re•Vision have focused on how arts-based research practices can lead to social change for disabled persons living within the province to strengthen inclusivity and representation (Rice, et al., 2015). Rice et al. (2021) discussed the need to re-conceptualize accessibility through the basic tenets of Open Access within a "post" COVID-19 world, to better ensure the participation of disabled people within mainstream artistic opportunities. Recent studies have explored the use of specific practices within the arts such as relaxed performance (Collins et al., 2022; Temple Jones et al., 2022) and TechnoAccess (Chandler, et al., 2018; Temple Jones et al., 2021) to document the effectiveness of approaches that center crip knowledges. Therefore, I hope to contribute to the literature through demonstrating how people with disabilities benefit through the implementation of disability-centered practices in arts-based spaces, as the participants within this study spoke of their own desire to see these types of accessible practices integrated into mainstream venues.

5.4 *Limitations*

The research contains potential limitations. Since my sample size extended to 10 participants, the findings cannot be taken to generalize the entire population of people with disabilities living in Peterborough-Nogojiwanong. The research is limited in that it only expresses the perspectives and experiences of the 10 people who were selected for interviews. Furthermore, because I conducted qualitative research in pursuing one-on-one interviews, these methods reduce the overall accuracy and reliability of the findings. Had I utilized the data instruments involved in quantitative research methods, such as surveys, I would have gained a stronger statistical representation and likely with a larger sample. Nevertheless, through examining a small sample size, I was able to conduct a more thorough analysis of the interview transcripts to generate wider themes. The intricacies and nuances within the participants' experiences and perspectives may have been overlooked had I chosen to use a larger sample size and/or quantitative research methods. As Clark (2010) writes, qualitative methods are “concerned with enhancing the autonomy of the individual within the process of research.” (p. 406). When conducting research on people with disabilities, qualitative research methods also allow researchers to “give voice” to the participants, as Ashby (2011) describes. Giving voice refers to the space participants are given in interviews to describe their own specific perspectives and experiences, letting them speak for themselves rather than the researcher(s) paraphrasing their words. There is an importance in ensuring the specificities of their ideas are clear to allow “the process by which individuals with disabilities can tell their own stories […] rather than always being the objects of someone else's representation.” (Ashby, 2011, para. 42). Qualitative methods empower the participants through centering their uniquely singular autonomous voice within the interview process, write-ups, and findings.

Future studies may consider utilizing quantitative methods to gather reliable numerical insights on the research topics. While there are advantages in gathering in-depth qualitative research, there is also numeric value in collecting quantitative data for accuracy and reliability purposes. But as Kitchin (2000) notes, people with disabilities are less likely to participate in research which uses quantitative research instruments, because these are viewed as exploitative and manipulative through granting the researcher the power to deduce and scrutinize the findings based on their own impressions, rather than letting the participants describe their experiences in their own words. Therefore, a mixed methods approach may be a more appropriate study to combine various types of research methods.

Another limitation is that all the participants I gathered are white settlers, leading to findings that are inherently tied to colonization and whiteness. While I was able to generate some discussion on how poor access practices can reinforce cultural barriers, these conversations were based in white-settler perspectives, rather than Indigenous persons who have lived experience with difference and cultural (in)accessibility. I believe my own identity as a white-settler may have also resulted in these gaps, as I lacked the research experience to properly market my research to reach a more diverse demographic in Peterborough-Nogojiwanong, which also includes black persons and people of colour.

Furthermore, although several participants discussed the ways in which race and queerness intersect within disability and access, only one participant explicitly commented on the role gender plays in these dynamics. The absence of gender may be due to the higher representation of male-identified participants in the study than female-identified participants, as it ratioed 7 to 3. The research questions I created also failed to generate deeper discussion focusing on how gender operates as a barrier to access.

Future research should strive to utilize a stronger decolonial framework to expand upon the prevalence of cultural barriers for Indigenous persons, particularly when exploring settler-led spaces. I engaged in white disability studies, which Christopher Bell (2006) coined to critique the overrepresentation of white academics in disability studies (and their subsequent fixation on white perspectives). More recent scholarship has examined the intersection of race and disability in their writing to challenge the role of whiteness in academia, including Nirmal Erevelles (2014; 2021), and Syrus Marcus Ware (2021), whose arts-based work strives to infuse racial justice with disability justice, and create solidarity among black and Indigenous communities to dismantle systemic inequality in Canada. To avoid reproducing white disability studies, the research also should look to incorporate a larger intersectional focus into its research methods, to gather a sample which represents Indigenous persons, black persons, and people of colour, and to explore how effective access practices may diverge among women, Indigenous people, black people, people of colour, and queer persons.

As I only interviewed people who engaged in the arts as attendees or participants, another limitation emerged in failing to gather the perspectives of people who work in arts organizations and are actively involved in the decision-making process. Had I added a research component to my sample gathering facilitators and organizers, I may have collected better insights into what barriers may be preventing local arts organizations from implementing more effective access measures (such as funding challenges). Future studies should explore these perspectives when conducting research related to access and arts organizations, as well as other current access practices organizations are employing to make their productions accessible to audiences.

5.5 *Conclusion*

The *Discussion* chapter examined the AODA to explore how the participants' views on meaningful access practices compare to the Act's recommendations on accessibility. I argued that the Act's barrier-free approach contrasts with the participants' desire for access to be pursued through ongoing communication within community-based relationships, wherein their needs are central to these interactions. Furthermore, the Act reproduces neoliberal ideologies in lacking any incentive or pressure for businesses and organizations to make their policies and practices accessible for people with disabilities, invoking their personal freedoms rather than framing access as essential to one's quality of life. These neoliberal views are also clear in the Act's lack of mention of COVID-19. Despite the implications for people with disabilities, the document contains zero references to the virus or preventative health practices, such as mask-wearing. In neglecting to advocate for disabled lives through placing pressure on these sectors to enforce COVID-19 safety measures, the AODA therefore leaves these responsibilities to individual disabled persons to protect themselves, which further increases their vulnerabilities.

The interview findings demonstrate how meaningful access practices follow Papalia's (2018) tenets within Open Access, requiring communities to establish relationships with disabled people to create welcoming, safe spaces wherein open communication can take place and they can verbalize their needs, without fear of being alienated, shamed, or punished. Hence, the problem with implementing accommodations occurs when these are approached as mere alternative solutions, because these are often enacted without consulting with disabled people. Accommodation can then reinforce barriers when people with disabilities feel stigmatized and ostracized through these features, while leading to marginalization in subtle ways through excluding people through their gender, race, and sexuality. There is thus an importance in consulting people with disabilities through the process of creating accessibility in the arts. For example, the participants expressed that having online options as an alternative to in-person shows creates better access for those who experience difficulties attending live events. Although outside factors such as funding gaps can prevent organizations from pursuing virtual platforms, there was nonetheless an expressed appreciation for organizations that were able to do so throughout the pandemic. Creating access is therefore a means of caring for people, such as through requiring audience members to wear masks to protect vulnerable persons.

In reflecting on the research limitations and the potential for future studies to build upon these gaps, the next chapter will bring the research to a close. In the *Conclusion*, I will reiterate the main findings in the document analysis on the AODA and the highlights drawn from the participant interviews. I will also further discuss the research potential for future research which focuses on access to the arts in Peterborough-Nogojiwanong.

Chapter 6 Conclusion

Lastly, in the *Conclusion* chapter, I will provide my own insights to summarize the findings, beginning with a reflection on *Coming back to the Research Questions*, then the overarching *Highlights of the Research* based on the interviews I conducted with the participants, as well as the *Highlights of the AODA* to outline my analysis of the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* (AODA). I will then provide my *Recommendations for Future Studies* and the *Significance of the Study*, and finally, the chapter will end with a few final musings on the topic of accessibility.

6.1 *Coming Back to the Research Questions*

To return to the research questions, I will reiterate these and provide succinct answers to each of these inquiries. The four main research questions I asked are: 1) How do people with disabilities define "access", 2) from the perspectives of the participants, are there barriers in access to the local arts, 3) has COVID-19 impacted access to the arts in Peterborough, and if so, how, and 4) How do participant perceptions of access compare with the standards outlined in the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act*?

For question one, the participants defined access as acts which involve groups and individuals clearly, openly, and continuously communicating with people with disabilities to better understand how they can meet their needs. Access emerges through communities that prioritize disabled people's presence and participation in arts-based spaces, who desire to care for the uniqueness and variation of their nuanced needs. Therefore, meaningful access practices serve to build and strengthen communities, with the goal of maintaining these relationships to care for each other in reciprocal ways. To answer question two, the participants cited various barriers which hindered their willingness to enter arts-based spaces, which included stigmatizing their identities through tokenizing their presence, ostracizing them through practices which made them feel like they were on display while attending to their needs in group settings, and marginalization when enforcing checklist accommodations, as the participants felt these approaches undermined the subtle ways people with more nuanced needs view accessibility, further alienating them from these spaces. These barriers further result in people engaging in Access Labour, which requires them to go out of their way to better understand an organization's accessibility policies when these are otherwise unavailable.

With regards to question three, COVID-19 greatly impacted people with disabilities, as it blocked them from being able to participate in the arts due to the threat of the virus and a lack of access to information on events for those without computer and phone technologies. However, local organizations' use of virtual platforms also increased their ability to participate in and attend events safely and comfortably, particularly for those who encountered problems attending in-person events prior to the pandemic. The participants' experiences showcase the importance of having virtual attendance options available, provided organizations are equipped with the resources to provide these. Finally, for question four, the participants' perceptions of access greatly differ from the standards in the AODA. The participants view access as a community-based interdependent practice based within reciprocal forms of care, whereas the AODA frames accessibility as an accommodation pursued by individual actors, emphasizing it as a personal choice rather than an essential need. These differences were most evident in discussions regarding COVID-19, because for many of the participants, their ability to access a public space was directly linked to whether that venue enforces practices such as mask-wearing. The AODA in comparison lacks any mention of the virus and/or preventative measures to curb illness among disabled populations.

Through the interviews, I was able to gather interesting and powerful insights on accessibility from the participants. The overarching findings will be discussed in further detail in the next section.

6.2 *Highlights of the Research*

The findings revealed several commonalities among the participants. Firstly, for access to be meaningful, these practices need to be based within a community that prioritizes the presence and contributions of non-normative body-minds within arts-based spaces, which aligns with the basic tenets of Papalia's (2018) concept of Open Access. These relationships should seek to prioritize their needs through ensuring people with disabilities have physical access, by holding productions in environments wherein they can easily navigate their surroundings, social access, in providing support persons to help increase their safety and comfortability, and economic access, through practices such as pay-what-you-can (PWYC), to make events financially viable for low-income groups. These practices need to be facilitated with the desire to make these spaces equitable and build sustainable relationships with disabled people, with the understanding that their body-minds hold diverse and valuable knowledge that benefits everyone.

Secondly, people with disabilities are marginalized in subtle and discreet ways, even in spaces that prioritize accessibility. Tokenization occurs when 1 or 2 disabled-identified persons are selected to participate in board meetings, productions, and application processes for performative purposes (to appear inclusive), rather than centering their perspectives through bringing a range of people with different types of disabilities together to account for the diversity within their experiences and create authentic representation. When organizations neglect to meaningfully consult with disabled persons it can lead to able-bodied people guiding access practices, resulting in experiences wherein disabled audience members feel stigmatized and alienated when requesting or utilizing accommodations within the venue. Furthermore, failing to consult with marginalized groups reinforces static and fixed understandings of disability and accessibility, which undermines and alienates those who have more nuanced needs, such as Indigenous persons.

Thirdly, people with disabilities are forced to undergo Access Labour to find an organization's accessibility policies when this information is not otherwise readily available, which is a deeply time-consuming, exhausting, and potentially anxiety-including process. A lack of accessible information then requires disabled people to do the emotionally laborious work of advocating for improved practices and educating organizations on how to make their policies more accessible to audiences.

Fourthly, to make events more accessible to wider audiences, the findings highlighted the advantages in providing options, such as to attend either in-person or virtually through online platforms, which may help to increase disabled people's engagement and participation in the arts. The pandemic showed how technologies can be utilized to create rare and unique virtual experiences altogether, to access the arts through safe, comfortable, and easy means. However, these options also need to be developed alongside people with disabilities to avoid producing technological errors or barriers that could make the virtual experience unpleasant, disorientating, or potentially triggering.

Finally, organizations engage in neoliberal compliance when requiring people with disabilities to undergo a complicated verification process to "prove" their disabilities in order to access accommodations, particularly when accounting for the limited number of conditions that are constituted as disabilities by provincial standards. Neoliberal compliance was further evidenced by the participants' experiences with organizations that chose to remove their COVID-19 health and safety measures upon the Ontario government lifting provincial mask mandates and physical distancing restrictions. Through removing these protocols, organizations helped normalize a post-pandemic culture that effectively undermines the virus as an ongoing risk to the greater populace, placing these responsibilities onto individuals to protect themselves. Subsequently, people with disabilities are exposed to further risks in their daily lives, while those who choose to mask and physically distance themselves are ostracized and alienated in public spaces. Neoliberal compliance therefore leaves them with the "choice" to either attend events with these risks or stay at home, potentially becoming isolated from social life and/or jeopardizing their income.

6.3 *Highlights of the AODA*

As stated in the *Discussion* chapter, the findings revealed several discrepancies between the participants' perceptions of effective access practices and the recommendations within the AODA (2005), with the participants holding negative or neutral views towards the purpose and accomplishments of the Act. While the Act takes a barrier-free approach towards accessibility, the participants viewed accessibility as a process which unfolds within communities who express desire to listen to and communicate with disabled people on ways to make spaces more welcoming to their body-minds. Value is placed on their needs because these are viewed as unique and valuable nuances, rather than as problems or burdens. The Act takes a top-down approach that encourages businesses and organizations to remove specific environmental barriers, as opposed to creating ongoing dialogue with disabled people through a communicative, person-to-person process.

The AODA (2005) “encourages” and “recommends” barrier-free accessibility for businesses and organizations while lacking the necessary incentives to force or pressure these sectors to make their policies and practices accessible. Upon conducting further analysis, I conclude that the Act reproduces neoliberal ideologies through permitting each individual organization, business, and related sector to decide how accessible they will be based on their own values, which effectively reduces accessibility to their personal choice rather than reinforcing that access is a basic need for an entire group of people. Furthermore, these neoliberal approaches towards accessibility are most apparent in the Act’s lack of recommendations for measures regarding COVID-19. Lacking any type of recommendation for businesses and organizations to implement policies such as mask-wearing does nothing to challenge the vulnerabilities people with disabilities experience in being exposed to the virus. These responsibilities are then allocated to the disabled individual to protect themselves, rather than pressuring these sectors to implement basic protocols to minimize the risks for those entering their spaces. The Act inadvertently reproduces eugenic ideologies through designating disabled body-minds as inferior and disposable in leaving them more susceptible to contracting the virus and becoming extremely sick and/or dying (Kelly et al., 2021).

6.4 *Recommendations for Future Research*

The *Discussion* chapter detailed the various limitations of this research with regards to the research design, sampling methods, and the gathered participant sample. The research’s qualitative nature denotes that the findings cannot be generalized to the wider population of people with disabilities living in Peterborough-Nogojiwanong, because only 10 participants were gathered for one-on-one interviews. Of these 10 participants, all identified as white settlers, which resulted in the findings lacking any in-depth insights into how Indigenous, black, and persons of colour experience (in)accessibility, disability and difference in the local arts. Furthermore, the research failed to delve into aspects related to gender-based barriers, because the participants were overwhelmingly represented by men with fewer female participants. These are only a few of the limitations of the research that may provide new possibilities for how future research can be pursued to fill these gaps and bring a more diverse representation to conversations concerning accessibility, barriers, disability and difference, and the arts.

As findings were gathered through one-on-one interviews, future research should consider collecting data through focus groups and/or participatory action research (PAR). While I led the research as a person with a disability, this process may have been more empowering and meaningful for the participants had I centered them within the design, sample, interview, and analysis stages, and may have enriched the overall findings. The participants also could have benefitted by allowing them to congregate within a shared space to discuss matters related to disability and accessibility, rather than pursuing the interviews in isolation from each other. If future studies use focus groups or PAR, these approaches may lead to new revelations in regards to access practices and barriers through letting the participants engage with one another and discuss their experiences and perspectives on the local arts.

Furthermore, this research focuses exclusively on those living in Peterborough-Nogojiwanong, as all the participants identified as living within or close to the downtown area. The findings failed to provide insights from people living in rural areas outside of the city. According to Gratton (2020), geographical location can serve as a barrier to access for people with disabilities, due to the lack of available public transportation, as well as poor, unreliable internet services limiting accessible information on events (La Rose et al., 2022). If future studies choose to focus on access to the arts in Peterborough-Nogojiwanong, it may be beneficial to include factors pertaining to geographical barriers which may be impacting disabled persons living in rural areas, such as the Kawarthas and Curve Lake.

As it comes closer to 2025, future studies should focus on exploring the AODA (2005) with regards to its outlined goal of establishing an accessible society, depending on whether the goal becomes realized. If their goal fails to be reached in the next two years, research opportunities will arise to examine what factors and conditions may have prevented it from occurring since the AODA's initial creation in 2005. Though this study was limited to 10 participants, it nevertheless showed that there are problems with how the Legislative Assembly of Ontario conceives of access, because it differs from disabled people's own understandings of what meaningful access practices are based on their lived experiences.

To avoid repeating the AODA’s mistakes, upcoming studies exploring access practices need to be situated within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Future research that focuses on access practices should strive to incorporate the pandemic into their analysis, to account for the ways people with disabilities continue to be isolated from social life due to the threat of contracting the virus, particularly with regards to inadequate organizational responses that fail to enforce safety measures. As of 2023, new variants are continuing to develop, becoming more threatening as the government continues to lack any initiative to enact preventative measures (Mangione, 2023). Researchers who focus on access should suppress the inclination to view society as being in a "post-COVID" state through incorporating the pandemic into their approaches towards disability, accessibility, and barriers.

6.5 *Significance of the Findings*

The research findings showcase that arts organizations are attempting to create meaningful access for people with disabilities, as the participants noted how organizations strive to make their venues accessible for audiences, even while working with limited resources. The participants' experiences with poor and inadequate practices tended to stem from larger government-mandated institutions failing to accommodate their needs, whereas the arts organizations they interacted with sought to work around these barriers to best ensure that people can still participate. According to the participants, meaningful access depends upon those who value and prioritize the contributions people with disabilities can bring to these spaces, because of and despite the gaps within state-facilitated institutions.

The participants nevertheless expressed that despite the intentions of organizations, there are still ways in which they experience stigmatization and marginalization in arts-based spaces. In situating access-making as a never-ending process, there is an importance in reiterating that any space can be inaccessible to one's needs based on several different factors. Recognizing that does not denote that the organization is unsympathetic or careless. Rather, it is reflective of the realities of disability in that it changes across time and space. What matters is that arts organizations are open to creating a space where people with disabilities can give voice to their concerns, which the participants have stated is taking place within most of the organizations they have engaged with. Access requires organizations to facilitate these conversations within spaces that are comfortable and safe for people who live with disability and difference.

In producing this study, I hope to provide local arts organizations with valuable information on which access practices are considered effective and which may be reproducing barriers for people with disabilities. Though the study only interviewed ten participants, they expressed a wide range of experiences within different local arts sectors in Peterborough-Nogojiwanong, which may be valuable to different types of organizations. Organizations and individual facilitators may use the knowledge to alter their own policies and practices, perhaps informing them of which are working and/or which may need to be changed to be more accessible.

6.6 *Concluding Thoughts*

The research was designed to provide a space for people with various types of disabilities to tell their stories, giving voice to the concerns, challenges, and obstacles they have faced over the previous five years. Access is vital to enriching disabled people's lives in societies in which we are forced to contend with economic, social, and political inequalities. It is a bridge separating two worlds: one which is hollow, isolating, and devoid of possibilities, while the other is filled with rich connections, opportunities, and futurities. When we offer our hands to help people cross that bridge, we communicate our desire to involve them as valued and beloved members in our communities. Access means power. It is relationships. It is culture. It is justice.

The participants expressed their deep love and need for the arts. As people with non-normative body-minds, the arts provide opportunities to create connections, express themselves, heal from their traumatic experiences with prejudice and discrimination, and to advocate for social and political change. The arts hold the potential to critique poor and harmful media representations of people with disabilities, as these depictions tended to portray disabled lives as tragic, dissatisfying, and unfulfilled (Swain & French, 2000). Songs, dance, poetry, theatre, and creative arts provide opportunities to create social and political change through representing disabled people's lives as positive, fulfilling, and enriching, while identifying social and economic barriers - rather than the disabilities - as the cause for these social inequalities. When access is created to these platforms, as Solvang (2012) writes, the arts become “primarily a vehicle for disabled people in their fight against oppression” (p. 186).

The arts hold an utter importance in bringing awareness to ableism and advocating for better conditions for people with disabilities, particularly within the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Meaningful access depends upon the daily grassroots work of communities who seek to prioritize disabled people’s presence within artistic spaces, to express appreciation for the knowledge and nuances their differences hold and bring. Access requires people to expand upon their own definitions of “disability” to welcome and value the richness in Indigenous, black, queer, and women’s perspectives and experiences. It transpires through thoughtful communication with and between strangers, acquaintances, and friends, and for these relationships to prioritize the complex and unique needs of those with non-normative body-minds.

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Appendix A – Letter of Information for Participants

Letter of Information

Invitation to Participate: This is an invitation for you to participate in a graduate thesis research project which seeks to explore and understand access to the arts for people with disabilities in Peterborough-Nogojiwanong.

Purpose of the Letter: The purpose of the letter is to provide you with information to inform your choice to participate in this research.

Purpose of this Study: The purpose of this study to obtain a better understanding about local access practices for people with disabilities, any barriers that may be hindering access to the arts, and the impacts of COVID-19 on accessibility.

Inclusion Criteria: You are eligible to participate in this study if you: 1) self-identify as having a disability, 2) have attended local arts events within the past five years, and 3) are over the age of 18. You are also required to possess the capacity to consent to participate in the research.

Exclusion Criteria: You are not eligible to participate in the study if you do not fit the aforementioned criteria.

Study Procedures: If these criteria apply to you, I am interested in interviewing you about access to the arts for people with disabilities in Peterborough-Nogojiwanong. If you choose to participate, this process will involve a face-to-face interview with the researcher. During the interview, the researcher will ask you a series of predetermined open-ended questions and additional follow-up questions. You will be interviewed at a location of your choosing based on your convenience. To ensure the safety of the researcher and participants, in person interviews will adhere to Ontario Health's Covid-19 recommendations, which encourages masking when meeting in a ventilated indoor setting. Masking is not required when meeting in outdoor settings. Interviews held at Trent University will also follow the Covid-19 precautions outlined by the university, which strongly encourages masking when occupying campus spaces. If desired, the interview can also be arranged over a Zoom or Skype meeting. It is anticipated that the interview will be approximately 30-60 minutes in length. I will be audio-recording the interviews for the purpose of creating interview transcripts. The recordings will be saved on an encrypted and password protected OneDrive account to ensure privacy and confidentiality. You will not be eligible to participate in the research study if you do not consent to being recorded.

Accommodations: If you would like any accommodations to be made, please let me know prior to the interview. If certain accommodations cannot be made, I will provide the option for you to email me your answers to the interview questions or to conduct the interview over the telephone. If you would like your guardian to be present for the interview, they will be required to sign a confidentiality agreement to maintain your privacy.

Potential Risks and Harms: Given that you will be asked questions pertaining to access to the arts, there are potential psychological risks in speaking on experiences which may be traumatic and upsetting. To mitigate these risks, I will do multiple check-ins during the interview and will allow for breaks. If you would like, you may review the interview questions prior to meeting. There are social and/or professional risks in disclosing your observations and opinions on Peterborough arts organizations, however the risks to you are minimal as efforts will be undertaken to ensure confidentiality in the presentation of research findings. To mitigate these risks, I will provide you with the option of using a pseudonym of your choice to protect your identity. Any identifying information will be removed and altered in the transcribing process, unless you consent to being identified. If specific organizations are mentioned during the interview, a vague description of that organization will be given in place of their name.

Potential Benefits: Although you may not directly benefit from participating in this study, you may feel a sense of satisfaction in discussing your experiences with (in)accessibility in Peterborough through sharing your opinions and experiences, and bringing attention to any problems that may be hindering participation in the arts.

Manner of Compensation: I recognize your time is valuable. A Tim Horton's gift card in the amount of $10.00 will be provided to those who are interviewed as a thank you for participating. If you choose to withdraw from this study while participating in or after completing the interview, you will still keep the compensation provided to you at the beginning of the interview.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate, refuse to answer any questions, or withdraw during the course of the interview. If you choose to withdraw, I will ask if you are willing to let me use the interview data collected up until that point. If you refuse, the data will be deleted immediately. Additionally, you can contact me to withdraw from the study up to two-weeks following the interview. At that point, the data will be destroyed and/or deleted immediately.

Confidentiality: All of your answers will be kept confidential. Only my supervisor and I will have access to the information gathered during the study. All information will be either stored on an encrypted and password protected OneDrive account or will be locked/secured in my office at Trent University. Your confidentiality will be maintained to the fullest extent. Unless consent is given, your name will not be explicitly stated, only a vague description of your disability will be given along with a pseudonym of your choosing to identify your perspective. I will ask you during the interview process what pseudonym you would like to use when referring to you in the transcripts and write-up of the thesis. All identifying information will be removed in the transcripts unless consent is otherwise provided.

If you consent to being identified, you will be asked to indicate on your consent form that you agree to being identified in the interview transcripts and in the presentation of the thesis.

I will be destroying and deleting the transcripts and audio-recordings upon the thesis being graded, which will occur approximately in August 2023. The consent forms will be retained until a presentation is made to local organizations outside of Trent University, unless this takes place prior the thesis being graded.

Contacts for Further Information: This research has been reviewed and approved by the Department of Canadian and Indigenous Studies at Trent University and conforms to the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines. If you have any questions about this process or about your rights as a participant in the study, please contact Jamie Muckle, Coordinator, Research Conduct and Reporting by phone at 705-748-1011 ext. 7896 or by email at jmuckle@trentu.ca. If you require any further information regarding this research project or your participation in the study, you may contact me at 647-460-7716 or via e-mail at jesscott@trentu.ca.

Publication: If you have consented to the disclosure of your name, this information will only be used in the presentation of the final thesis project. In any additional or external publications where the results of the study are published, your name will not be used. If you would like to review a copy of the final thesis, please contact me via email.

This letter is yours to keep for future reference.

Thank you for expressing interest in participating in this research.

Jessica Scott

Appendix B: Informed Consent Form for Participants

Informed Consent Form

Date: 03/20/2022

Study Name: Exploring Access to the Arts for People with Disabilities in Peterborough-Nogojiwanong.

Researcher: Jessica Scott

Purpose of the Research: To obtain a better understanding about meaningful access practices for people with disabilities, any barriers that may be hindering access to the local arts, and the potential impacts COVID-19 may have had on accessibility.

What You Will Be Asked to Do in the Research: You will be asked to participate in a semi-structured interview that will last approximately 30 to 60 minutes. The interview will be audio-recorded.

Accommodations: If you would like any accommodations to be made, please let me know prior to the interview. If certain accommodations cannot be made, I will provide the option for you to email me your answers to the interview questions or to conduct the interview over the telephone. If you would like your guardian to be present for the interview, they will be required to sign a confidentiality agreement to maintain your privacy.

Risks and Discomforts: This research focuses on local access to the arts. Given that you will be asked questions pertaining to your experiences with (in)accessibility, there are possible psychological risks in speaking on potentially traumatic events relating to your disability. I will do multiple check-ins throughout the interview and will offer breaks. You have the right to refuse to answer any questions you are uncomfortable answering. There are also social/professional risks in disclosing your observations and opinions on Peterborough arts organizations. To mitigate these risks, I will provide you with the option of using a pseudonym of your choice to protect your identity. Any identifying information will be removed and altered in the transcribing process, unless you consent to being identified.

Benefits of the Research and Benefits to You: The purpose of this research is to gather information about the nature of local access practices, determine whether there are any challenges or barriers undermining access, and identify the impacts COVID-19 had on access to the local arts. You may feel a sense of personal satisfaction from taking part in research that seeks to gather information on accessibility to the arts in Peterborough-Nogojiwanong through sharing your opinions and experiences, and bringing attention to any problems that may be hindering participation in the arts.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation in the study is voluntary. You may choose to stop participating at any time. You may also choose not to answer any question(s) you are uncomfortable answering. Your decision not to volunteer will not influence the nature of your relationship with Jessica Scott, or the nature of your relationship with Trent University either now, or in the future. If you choose to withdraw, your decision will not have any negative impacts on your reputation or your relationship with Jessica Scott or Trent University.

Withdrawal from the Study: You can stop participating in the study at any time, for any reason, if you so decide. If you choose to withdraw during the course of the interview, I will ask to use the data collected up until that point. If you refuse, the data will be deleted. You can contact me up to two weeks after the interview to withdraw from the study for any reason. At that point, your data will be destroyed and/or deleted.

Confidentiality and Anonymity: Unless consent is given, you will not be explicitly named, only a vague description of your disability will be given along with a pseudonym of your choosing to identify your perspective. I will ask you during the interview process what pseudonym you would like to use when referring to you in the transcripts and write-up of the thesis. With your consent the interview will be audio recorded. These encrypted tapes and the information obtained during the interview will be saved on an encrypted and password protected OneDrive account. Any identifying information in the transcripts will be altered unless otherwise consented. Your consent form will be safely stored in a locked file drawer in a locked office at Trent University. Upon the thesis being graded the data will be destroyed/deleted. Consent forms will be retained until a presentation is made to organizations outside of Trent University, unless this occurs before the thesis is graded. Only the principal researcher and research supervisors will have access to this information. Confidentiality will be provided to the fullest extent possible by law.

Questions About the Research? This research has been reviewed and approved by the Department of Canadian and Indigenous Studies at Trent University and conforms to the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines. If you have any questions about this process or about your rights as a participant in the study, please contact Jamie Muckle, Coordinator, Research Conduct and Reporting by phone at 705-748-1011 ext. 7896 or by email at jmuckle@trentu.ca. If you have questions about the research in general or about your role in the study, please feel free to contact Jessica Scott by e-mail at jesscott@trentu.ca.

Identification Choices:

- ☐ I would like my name to be identified
- ☐ I would like to use a pseudonym

Legal Rights and Signatures:

I _________________________, consent to participate in "Exploring Arts Access for People with Disabilities in Peterborough-Nogojiwanong" conducted by Jessica Scott. I have understood the nature of this project and wish to participate. I am not waiving any of my legal rights by signing this form. My signature below indicates my consent.

_________________________	_________________________
Participant Signature	Date
_________________________	_________________________
Principal Researcher Signature	Date

Appendix C: Confidentiality Agreement for Legal Guardians of Participants

CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

Title of Research Project: Exploring Access to the Arts for People with Disabilities in Peterborough-Nogojiwanong

Purpose of this Agreement:

As a guardian I understand that I may have access to confidential information about the research and the participant. By signing this statement, I am indicating my understanding of my responsibilities to maintain confidentiality and agree to the following:

- I understand that the participant has consented to being interviewed based on their own desire to participate in this research.
- I understand that names, organizations, and any other identifying information made by the participant are completely confidential.
- I agree not to divulge, publish, or otherwise make known to unauthorized persons or to the public any information obtained in the course of this interview that could identify the persons who participated in the study.
- I understand that all information about the study participant obtained or accessed by me in the course of this interview is confidential. I agree not to divulge or otherwise make known to unauthorized persons any of this information.
- I agree to notify the principal researcher immediately should I become aware of an actual breach of confidentiality or a situation which could potentially result in a breach, whether this be on my part or on the part of another person.

Contacts for Further Information: This research has been reviewed and approved by the Department of Canadian and Indigenous Studies at Trent University and conforms to the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines. If you have any questions about this process, please contact Jamie Muckle, Coordinator, Research Conduct and Reporting by phone at 705-748-1011 ext. 7896 or by email at jmuckle@trentu.ca. If you require any further information regarding this research project, you may contact the researcher, Jessica Scott, at 647-460-7716 or via e-mail at jesscott@trentu.ca.

________________________________ ________________

Guardian Signature Date

________________________________ ________________

Principal Researcher Signature Date

Appendix D: Interview Guide

Interview Questions

1. What area of the arts are you interested in?
2. What is your disability?
3. Do you feel a sense of belonging when attending arts events?
    a. Has this impacted your engagement with the arts?
4. Have there been times you haven't been able to or chose not to attend an arts event due to inaccessibility, and if so, why?
5. Have you ever had to leave an arts event you were attending due to it being inaccessible to your specific needs?
    a. Can you expand on that experience?
6. Do you feel that the local arts are a welcoming space for someone like you?
    a. What changes can be made to make these spaces welcoming?
7. Over the last two years, has COVID impacted your ability to engage with the arts?
8. Over the last two years, have you participated in any online arts events, and if so, what were those experiences like?
9. What can be done to improve access to the arts in Peterborough?
10. How familiar are you with the Ontarians with Disabilities Act?
    a. Do you feel that the Act has improved access and reduced barriers to art events for people with disabilities?
11. What, if any, spaces, people, or practices have removed or minimized barriers to arts events over the past five years?
12. Is there anything else you would like to add?