

# Magic from the madness: On black disabled activists and artists making change in 2016

by Syrus Marcus Ware

In 2016 we commiserated. We ate cubes of cheese at all the art things and sighed about the year, hopefully whispering about 2017. At the time of writing, I am holding my breath for these last few days of 2016, hoping to make it into 2017 with only a few more kicks in the teeth — or in light of my recent kidney infection, the kidneys.

It's hard to reflect back on a year such as this one — but when I do I realize that despite it all, we have survived. And for me, this survival is in large part due to the "black crip magic": the power and beauty of black disabled activists and artists making change, creating space, innovating, producing challenging and brave new works and articulating potential futures and ways forward together.

Black queer, trans and disabled artists led several large-scale mobilizations that gave us so much life this year, and that changed the face of the city in the process. These include the 15 day [Black Lives Matter - Toronto](#) occupation of the Toronto police Headquarters in March, their durational performative action during the Toronto Pride Parade in July and their day-long art-based sit in at the SIU headquarters in August.

[Artists and activists](#) with disabilities played a large role in leading these actions, crafting artistic responses the targeted policing that had resulted in so much black disabled death throughout 2016. Allied artists wrote a beautiful [open letter](#) that saw hundreds sign on in support of this organizing. Artists Gloria Swain and Mel Campbell's solo shows ([Mad Room](#), and [Point of Origin](#), respectively) at Tangled Art Gallery over the summer and fall were met with critical

acclaim and their new bodies of work had people talking about blackness, disability, madness and self-determination.

In *Mad Room*, Swain created an installation that took visitors through her experience of madness, and the ways that it had informed her activism, her involvement in Black Lives Matter and in supporting the lives of trans women of colour, in particular the [Say Her Name](#) campaign. Campbell's *Point of Origin* featured textile works that celebrated spoony magic, playfully moving us stitch by stitch through astrology, black liberation theory and femme genius. Their works spanned the gallery space, tactile engagements that were low relief homages to the power of black disabled people. And black queer, trans and gender variant artists captivated during Tangled Art + Disability's [Crippling the Arts](#) Symposium and the [Crippling the Stage](#) performance evening produced by the British Council at Harbourfront in the Spring of 2016.

For me, my own black crip magic has gotten me through an overwhelming year. Autoimmune flare ups and new experiences of disability affected when, how and where I worked. I've never had a more successful year, and yet I've also never had a more sucky one. 2016 put the suc(k) in suc-cessful. I found myself with wonderful, new challenging career opportunities, new collaborations with wonderful artists and new kinds of organizing and mobilizing options manifested.

In April, I co-curated [The Summit](#) with Sarah Garton Stanley through the National Arts Centre, a three day gathering of disabled artists and performers. We spent three glorious days practicing collective care while discussing how to change the shape of Canadian theatre and the processes of its creation. I joined the faculty team at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity and began spending time in

Banff, working on programs rooted in Indigenous knowledge and guided by Elders. In June, I was awarded a Vanier Scholarship, a national academic award that celebrates Canada's top scholars. That same month, I was named the Daniel's Spectrum inaugural artist-in-residence. I officially joined the organizing team for Black Lives Matter Toronto. I developed deeper relationships with other black artists and planned for new collaborative projects to manifest throughout the remainder of 2016. Things were definitely on the up.

But then one day in August, I couldn't see out of my left eye. My vision was cloudy and murky and watery. I brushed it off as long as I could, before the pain of it drove me to the emergency department. I had developed iritis and a cornea infection, likely related to my autoimmune issues (and perhaps also a touch of careless contact lens wearing to boot).

I couldn't see at all, and then not well for weeks. Gone were my dreamy plans of drawing for 84 hours chunks at the residency, a continuation of my super-realist [Activist Portrait Series](#) — large scale homages to artists and activists drawn in impossibly long durations. Academic deadlines had to be delayed. On the closing day of an exhibition that I had curated, I went to help take it down. I couldn't wear my corrective lenses, and I wore an eye patch. I ran my hands along the walls to feel for each artwork. I was really there for show, at best there to give instructions to the team about which work was to be shipped back to where. I had help throughout this process, and got tremendous support from others who had been through similar experiences.

By early October, the stress of mounting deadlines pushed off by 6 weeks of low/no vision and the stress of the world as it was changing pushed my autoimmune issues into overdrive. I left on a speaking

tour that would take me from a residency in Banff to two conferences in Montreal and a lecture in Vancouver. I got a couple of infections that were hard to kick, and, rather than walking on stage in Vancouver with my shoulders back and head high, I limped onstage, dripping with sweat from a high fever caused by a kidney infection. Not so crip magical. Or maybe it was... but painful magic.

Throughout this year I realized that my body had created ways for me to slow down, to pause in the middle of a storm, to be humbled, to be human in moments of unreal chaos. Because of my autoimmune flare ups, I had time to lie in the grass, imagining the sky. I had to anchor myself in gravity, even as the rollercoaster raged on around me. Because of these flare ups, I had to reach out to people, to be offered and to accept help.

I became more free, and even began to imagine myself as something other than just my work and my production capacity. As artists, we are expected to produce tremendously and to be endlessly social while meeting deadline after deadline. Our value is measured by what we make. But what happens when we cant make? When we can't see our way into the gallery? When we cant be social or can't create, not today and not tomorrow either?

In 2016, I found this out. I became quiet, and I listened more to the Earth while I lay on it. To my surprise, the sounds of life on this planet had a lot to say. I fell back into a memory of a way of being and living that was much more connected to the earth and a more measured pace of life. I listened to the guidance of Corleigh Powderface, the Elder I was privileged to be working with in Banff. I went outside, and I spent time with the trees. I reconnected to Earth.

This process reminded me of this brilliant performance by [Lynx Sainte-Marie](#) that I had witnessed at the Crippling the Stage event at Harbourfront Centre months earlier in 2016. In their performance, Sainte-Marie had articulated a futuristic world where the experiences of folks with disabilities were seen as an appropriate reaction to a violent system, where the ways that our bodies and minds worked were magical reactions allowing us to tap into another realm with essential messages for the survival of all life on this planet. Through slow and measured movements — and an audio soundscape — Sainte-Marie imagined a future where the survival of life on this planet relied on disabled people.

I found myself back where I'd begun the year, listening to black crip magic and being so moved by our capacity for change and life. And so, with my shoulders squared, I will take these remaining days of 2016 in my own hands. I will gently and lovingly squeeze out the last drops, enjoying the slowness of these remaining moments of the year. And if 2016 fights back, I may even get to lay down again and be off of the roller coaster for a moment.

PS — As evidence of further crip magic, I exchange deliveries of desserts with a dear disabled artist and activist friend of mine, who resides in the US whenever we are sick or ill. Whatever happens for the rest of the year, I know that my crip sister has my back and that gluten free treats are just a text or email away. If that's not magic, I don't know what is.

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