

Stories from the brainreels transcript

March 22, 2017

Introduction

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CHERYL: Welcome to Stories from the brainreels, a podcast about brain injury, disability, and neurodiversity, with a focus on art, culture, and disability pride.

My guest is Sara Acevedo. She'll be talking about intersections of race and disability, some ways that Gloria Steinem's speech at the Women's March on January 21st failed disability community, as many public events around feminism do, and the ways Sara uses her proud Autistic, mestiza identities to build and sustain community.

Before we get into today's interview, I wanna let folks know that I just finished an online class called Healing from Toxic Whiteness offered by Everyday Feminism. The class is self-paced, and the videos all have Closed Captions. There's a [link in the show transcript to sign up](#). If it's closed, you can sign up to get an alert when it opens again. Since we talked about unconscious bias on the [recent episode with Jane Vogel and Gigi Williams](#), I wanted to bring up this class to my listeners. Anyone can take it, but it's really a class most geared to white people like me. And by "like me," I mean white people like me who feel like we're not perpetuating racism because we do good work, and we try not to do or say racist things. But we do. We do and say racist things without knowing it, and sometimes we do while we do know it, but we don't know what else to do in the moment. We're conditioned to enjoy our comfort and not face this. The class takes you through steps and exercises to come to terms with the ways that we enact white fragility, white perfectionism, white supremacy, and toxic whiteness all the time without meaning to. It's really up to white people to take the lead in unlearning and stopping racism. So from one white person to any white people listening to or reading this episode, check out the class, please. Even if you don't feel like you need it because you're one of the good ones who isn't racist. (Because that line of thinking is actually conditioned by white supremacist ideas, as you'll learn in the class!) So yeah, especially if you feel like you don't need it. Sign up.

You can subscribe to this podcast on iTunes, Stitcher Radio, and SoundCloud. More details about guests and links are at the blog at [whoamitostopit.com](#), and screen-reader accessible podcast transcripts are

there too. Don't forget some great neurodiversity pride swag at cafepress.com/whoamitostopit. All proceeds go toward the documentary "Who Am I To Stop It" about artists with traumatic brain injury.

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Interview

CHERYL: It's so wonderful to have you on the show today. Thanks for being with me. Tell folks about who you are and what you do.

SARA: My name is Sara Maria Acevedo. I was born and raised in Colombia. I arrived in 2009 to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and I went to Temple University to get a graduate degree in Disability Studies. In 2012, I came to San Francisco to get my doctoral degree in anthropology and social change with a focus on disability justice at the California Institute of Integral Studies.

I reclaim the mestiza identity, which poses a lot of questions for the idea of mestizaje, which actually translates as "mixture" between the indigenous peoples of the Americas and the European colonizers. It's a term that has had in the past, I guess, derogative undertones, and I reclaim it because I believe it's important to highlight the very horrible and very real and very concrete ways of sexual colonizing. I am a woman with very pale tone of skin and very light eyes and hair, which also creates a lot of dissonance for me here. So the color of my skin is actually the result and the product of sexual violence emerging from colonizing processes. So I claim mestiza for that reason. Also for the fact that I also do not necessarily identify with the experience of many other Latinas that I encounter in the everyday, Latinas whose families emigrated to the United States and so happened that these women were born and raised here in the United States. So I don't encounter many experiences of women from Latin America who have emigrated later on in life to this country. So I identify as mestiza.

I identify as neurowitch [chuckles], which is so funny. It's a funny iteration coming out of the identity of neurodivergent and witch, 'cause I'm a witch. People ask me, "Oh, what tradition? Is it Wiccan? Is it this and that? Is it the Goddess, the Divine Feminine?" For me, it all emerges from the work of Silvia Federici. She writes *Caliban and the Witch*, and she talks about reproductive rights for women. And she talks about the witch hunts in the 1700s and how women who were landowners and who were making their own contraceptives and having extra-marital relationships and who were then deemed deviant and "insane" and "crazy," which then obviously evolved into a different form of bodily control of women in the humanist era

and then later on with the birth of psychiatry and so on and so forth. So that's the tradition that I reclaim. So I have been thinking and writing about the evolution of the idea of the witch, not only the personhood and the embodiment of resilient women who are masters of their own bodies and who take back the patriarchy in ways that are obviously threatening our physical integrity, emotional integrity and right to collectivity and right of assembly and of demonstration and of protest. It's also that idea that evolves throughout the different periods in history as much as the concept of disability does. It's like, what does it mean according to what is convenient for the sort of political and cultural and social dominant narratives? So it's bodies that are always at the mercy of.

I am Autistic. I recently, very recently found out that I was Autistic. It's been a year and a couple of months, perhaps. I always knew that I was neurodivergent. I just didn't have the language for it, and the language is actually very new. It comes out of 1989, first time Judy Singer in her dissertation started talking about neurological differences and what that meant in terms of looking at forms of oppression around markers of difference, bodily difference: race, class, so on and so forth. And I am a PhD student. I am a PhD candidate, actually. Ooh [laughs]! I'm ABD: all but dissertation. And I'm hoping to defend my dissertation in early 2018. I'm excited about that. I am a professor. I teach undergraduate students, and I teach disability, disability justice, disability studies, and activist anthropology. And I am also the Diversity and Disability Advocacy fellow for the Office of Diversity and Inclusion at CIIS. I think I'm many more things, but those are the ones that I run with [laughs].

Disability Studies and Disability Justice

CHERYL: Can you briefly describe the difference between disability studies and disability justice?

SARA: So Disability Studies is an intellectual, academic discipline that was actually born out of grassroots and activist efforts in bringing, at the time, disability rights issues into public consciousness and academic awareness. There were many, many disciplines tackling disability in a way that was neglecting disabled voices. So Disability Studies is a discipline that grew out of that effort to bring and amplify our voices and to say we can talk for ourselves, and there's a wealth of information and materials and literature and methodologies that we have designed and that we would like to incorporate into larger disciplines. So disability studies draws from many different disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, the larger humanities, philosophy, education, bioethics, political theory with the idea of

not tokenizing disability issues but centering and bringing disability issues to bear alongside other forms of oppression: race, class, gender expression, sexual orientation, citizenship, and so on.

So the disability rights movement began in the late '60s, and it was coming out of a, I guess I would say, a little bit over a decade of activism started by parents and different parents' movements. And then disability rights activists took to the streets for the first time as a collective to fight for civil rights. Let's say that disability rights was akin to other movements and was actually brought about and strengthened by other movements like the women's movement and the Black liberation movement and larger civil rights movements and was mostly focused on those activists who were able to take to the streets then, right? So it was centering mostly physically disabled white men who were largely heterocis male. There was a large misrepresentation of many other constituents that were obviously naturally part of the global disability experience. I know that there was a lot of collaboration between certain facets of the disability rights movement with queer grassroots activist constituents. There was a lot of collaboration with the Black Panthers. Those weren't largely represented in the whole history of the disability rights movement.

So disability justice, I would dare say a very new form of expression of disability activism. The emphasis is placed on thinking about disability issues at the intersections of. So again at the intersections of race, class, gender expression, sexual orientation, and so on and so forth. And it's centering a form of universal access in a way that would then lead to collective liberation. So it isn't only liberation or inclusion or integration for disabled people, but it is actually thinking about a collective liberation for all oppressed groups.

And disability studies has been evolving with the shifting of the focus of disability rights toward disability justice and has been tackling all of these issues. And it's actually a discipline that's very self-reflective and follows along with whatever the various disability communities are talking about and thinking about on the ground. Because it's a form of representation within the institution. So it's disabled scholars and disabled scholars that are actually activists. The general make of disability studies activism, it comes from grassroots constituents.

CHERYL: That was a great explanation and so helpful 'cause I know a lot of people are like, "Oh, disability studies? special ed." No.

SARA: Oh, totally. Oh, yes.

CHERYL: And the term disability justice really is coined by Patty Berne.

SARA: From [Sins Invalid](#), a troupe of disabled artists centering the non-binary and gender-fluid experiences and centering race. It is wonderful, aesthetic, political, absolutely beautiful, in your face, this is what disability looks like. And the expression of the performances and everything that they do really tackles the idea that disabled people are non-sexual and that our bodies do not desire or are not desirable. So there is a lot of play with the sensual and sexual aspect of disability in ways that are [laughs] that create a lot of dissonance for non-disabled audiences, and they create a lot of pleasure and a lot of resonance for disabled audiences.

So coined by Patty Berne, who's based in Berkeley here, where I am, and is being also undertaken and developed alongside with Mia Mingus who's been talking about these intersections of the existence of disability as a global, political, and cultural experience that isn't separated or cannot be separated from other forms of identity.

The Power of Language and Identity

CHERYL: While you're talking about disability being a global experience, I'm thinking about how I know you refer to the country that we're in right now as the United States, and you take a really firm, reasoned stance to not call this America the way many people call it.

SARA: A lot of my work is around language and the power of discourse and how discourse materializes. So it's not only what we say, but what we say does something. It always does something, and that's something that I incorporate in my work quite often. It's kind of like a centerpiece of my work. I'm a trained linguist, and so I have a fascination with words and with symbolic systems that are not only symbolic systems but that are actually materializing concrete realities and have a lot of power. I've seen that very clearly with the history of disability and how labeling and bodily taxonomies have turned into policy, and policy has done a lot of damage to the various disability communities in various forms: forceful sterilization and mutilation, incarceration, and institutionalization.

So in that same vein, I see that there's this conflation, very common. And it not only stems from people here in the United States identifying their country as America, but it's also a phenomena that is global. For me, there's a lot of weight in that conflation. Again, because it's not only a linguistic phenomena, right? "Oh, we all know what we're talking about, right?" 'Cause that's what I get when I tell people. "Oh, you mean the United States?" "Oh, you know what I'm talking about!" Well, actually those designations, the

naming of things has a lot to do with divisions and with the strengthening of borders and with ideas of citizenship and non-citizenship and belonging and exclusion. So I see that there's a lot of neglect in terms of thinking about South America and the global South as a hemisphere producing forms of knowledge and different ways of being in the world and different forms of understanding the world and naming the world and perceiving the world that actually, and very conveniently, don't suit the Western narrative. So I think it's important to really name those things and to know that Latin America exists below Mexico. And the naming of Mexico emerging from the United States is also, I see it as a prop kind of thing. It's always creating this antinomy, like we are here, and you are there. I am you, and you are not me kind of negative dialectic of trying to explain who belongs and who doesn't. So in that whole political narrative, the lives of South Americans, or largely in the global South, are forgotten and erased from the idea that we are all knowledge producers and meaning makers. With my students, we're doing a lot of work with maps, and we're reading Rebecca Solnit's *Infinite City: An Atlas of San Francisco*. It's just fascinating to see the superior position of maps that have been created, like plain cartography that is very much biased and very much filtered through the eyes and through the experiences and through the perspectives and positionalities of the cartographer versus what that map could look like or would look like if you were addressing a completely different issue that is not plainly geographical or one of location or one of street divisions and so on and so forth. But looking, for instance at who were the women who initiated the Green movement here, in San Francisco, and so looking at those two different maps and just seeing the different sites where those women were initiating actions and demonstrations and so on. It's really interesting. So in terms of mapping and in terms of thinking about different human cartography as opposed to just geographical representations of, I guess, the world. I think it's important to look at language and the power that language has to name and to do, especially to do.

CHERYL: You have this thing playing out where white people here in the US--let's just take the US right now--you've got white people telling you, "Don't be so sensitive about my language." And you have white, especially non-disabled, people trying to educate you and fix you and help you. Talk about the ways that people try to fix or help or educate you across different parts of your identity.

SARA: I experience that very clearly with labels around disability and ableist language and in trying to share with not only my students but just in everyday life and trying to share why ableist language is damaging, and that

no, we are not petty; no, we are not just looking at a label, "No, get over it. There's things more important to do and to think about and to fight for than language." I get a lot of ablesplaining, which is when someone who isn't disabled tries to tell you what disability is and what your experience is like. I see this correlation between white fragility and able fragility. I don't see them as very indistinguishable; I see them as separate and intersecting. I think that ableism is a tool of white supremacy. I don't think that there's a way of talking about one without the other, but that's just me [laughs]. I know there are many, many, many disabled people and activists and thinkers.

CHERYL: Yeah. I was gonna say, it's not just you!

SARA: It's really not just me, yeah. So I have a lot of conflict with this. It's something that I carry with me and that creates a lot of trauma for me. It's complex, and it's contradictory like everything. I think everything is complex and contradictory. Like, I'm really against binaries and dichotomies and polarities like that, because I think the world doesn't work in twos. We contain multiplicities; we're multiple. So to try and capture the existence or human experience or the non-human animal experience or the natural world in twos, it serves to create those categories and those borders that produce a lot of exclusion and neglect and just falling through the cracks, things that don't fit in the twos. So I am constantly receiving projections of whiteness and able-bodiedness. Apparently I pass as white. And I don't discount at all the impact of lateral privilege. I think it's diversity of tactics; it can do a lot. It gets me into spaces. It gives me platforms to talk about these things. So as such, I totally recognize the value and the benefit of that for the collective. At the same time--again, contradiction--I walk around feeling like I'm not white, will never be white. My culture has nothing to do with whiteness aside from us being fully assimilated and colonized from Europe first and then the United States in terms of the neoliberal project and so on and so forth. And definitely, I'm not able-bodied. Because I'm Autistic, and because I am chronically ill, I am invisibly disabled, right?

When I talk about Autism and being an Autistic woman and still identifying as invisibly disabled, that has a lot to do with gender dynamics with how women are underrepresented in terms of having access to a diagnosis, having access to-- You know Ellen Samuels, the disability studies scholar and activist and writer? She talks about the biocertificate on life, and I've always appreciated that. We had a conversation, and she said, "Oh, it's like you have to provide a biocertificate of your experience in order to access many different things." You have to work within these systems that are

structured around our lives. One of those systems is the medical establishment that grants us--or not--access to the different services that we need in order to navigate a world that is pretty hostile to different ways of being in the world and different ways of thinking and different neurological experiences, neurocognitive experiences.

Because I'm a woman, I've been socialized and conditioned to perform in certain ways. And because I have access to speech, and because to survive I feel I have had to drown a lot of myself and invisibilize and sort of sever that, although not completely or fully. 'Cause that still lives in me very strongly, but I guess, severed from the visible world or the perceptible world or the tangible world. My outward experience or my somatic expression has been very, very limited and very, I guess, coopted by the gender roles and trying to perform as a woman: So sit in a certain way, don't rock 'cause that's unprofessional, don't stim because nobody's gonna take you seriously, don't verbally stim because that's gonna make you sound like a child. So all of these things that we carry, like I'm saying, it's like this viscous mass of ways of being that are multiple and that exist within us. And yet we have to perform an acceptable way of being and whatever that means. So that has a lot to do with internalized ableism and with wanting to survive. So I do carry a lot of survivor's guilt in relation to being Autistic and having access to speech and being able to, I guess, assimilate and participate of those power structures that I'm totally caught between. I am a scholar, I'm an academic, I have my foot in the academy, I have platforms for speaking and discussing these issues. It's like my co-researcher Brent White says--who's also Autistic--he says, "Well, is it better to have a non-Autistic person speak about the experiences of Autistics who don't have access to speech, or is it better as Autistics, to try to think about in the ways that we are very similar and akin to Autistics who do not have access to speech and who communicate in very many different ways that are not socially sanctioned or acceptable?" Because if you think about how humans have been divided from non-human animals is that the fetishization of speech, like oh, human beings are language beings. Therefore, whoever doesn't have access to speech is not a human being. So I think that it's important, and it's all very complex. So in carrying those identities, I do get a lot of people trying to tell me who I am and who I'm not, especially around [sighs] my accent and just trying to never really let my cadence really come out when I'm upset or when I'm angry or when I'm counting. I need to count in Spanish. I'm not very good with numbers at all. I have dyscalculia, which is akin to dyslexia but with numbers. And when I count out loud, I need to count in Spanish. Even when I don't count out loud, I like to count in Spanish. It's just always

the experience of trying to hide that. I'm already a woman in the academy, and I'm also brown, and I'm also disabled. So all of those intersections of identity create spaces for a lot of unsolicited advice and a lot of unsolicited commenting on my lived experience and how I can possibly be Autistic because look. You talk, and you establish eye contact, and you're emotionally intelligent! And intelligent, for me, is just like it doesn't really mean anything to me. And I do get a lot of sensitivity around, "Oh, but you know what I mean!" And it's like, yeah, but it's like, "Well, I'm white, I'm American, this is my language. And it's not only that this is my language. This is my country, and you're here. So why are you here if you're not gonna roll with the ways here?" It speaks to the whole idea of oh, where your work is convenient for us, it does a lot here in terms of perhaps looking good or oh, look how progressive or look how inclusive we are. And then I still remain a brown woman in the academy. I mean, that's very real. And [sighs] yeah, I just simply don't even know how else to [chuckles] talk about the frustration that that creates in me and the isolation. It's like perpetually living in exile, you know? Yeah.

CHERYL: Yeah, yeah, but 'cause you know, you play the game.

SARA: You have to play the game. It's all performance. It's a performative life for sure.

CHERYL: Yeah! Yeah. I hear you talk about the isolation. And you talk about the way that you have to invisibilize parts of yourself so that you'll be accepted as "professional," I hear that, and it just—ugh—it just claws at me. In what way is being Autistic actually causing a problem? Why must you impart these rules on everything! Anyway!

BOTH: [laugh]

SARA: I've actually been very open, and I've come out at CIIS where I work to everybody. I think everybody knows because of my work and what I do. And I wanna recognize the absolute privilege that I have to do that, you know? It's privilege to be at an academic institution and to be absolutely open about who you are, knowing that you are proud of it, but the rest of your surroundings may be pathologizing or medicalizing your experience, and that's just very common. Or looking at you in certain ways: "Oh, look at this woman. She's getting a PhD." This has nothing to do-- "Oh, look. She's getting a PhD, and she's rocking or talking in this voice that's weird or doing things with her hands." And many times, I don't. I don't do those things, but not because I'm censoring myself. They just come out, and then when they come out, they come out. But there are other instances where I'm very

purposely censoring myself, and that is painful. Because as much as when you find out, and you're like, "Oh, this makes so much sense. I'm Autistic. A lot of my, or all of my, childhood experiences now make sense. Or all of my relationships or romantic attempts at relationships make sense, why they failed." And yet, there's still that voice inside of me that's telling me that I am not like, I am not like. Or that I'm taking space from. It's difficult. And it's been a total revelation and realization, and it's made me so much happier and so much fuller, and it's a process. But the value of community and that, it has no-- I don't even know how to say it. It's invaluable. It's absolutely invaluable.

[music]

Gloria Steinem's Women's March, Ableism, and Sanism

CHERYL: With all of this background we just got from Sara, let's now turn to the ways that she felt Gloria Steinem's Women's March speech threw disability community under the bus in how she chose to critique 45.

SARA: I guess I'll begin by telling you how I felt about Steinem's speech at the Women's March. I had liked Gloria Steinem a long time ago. Then I don't remember the last time she went public and said something really egregious. My intellectual curiosity and my love for liberatory methodology and pedagogy totally, totally emerges from Black feminist thought. I mean, I adore Patricia Hill Collins. Audre Lorde, obviously, is one of my, I guess, intellectual mentors. I've always felt that we need all of the voices, right, that we need all of the voices. That in decentering, we gotta make sure that we don't tokenize. And I feel like that can be accomplished by incorporating all of the voices together and in critical conversation around what each voice cannot provide, and therefore, why it's important that there is always a multiplicity of voices together, thinking together, creating together, editing each other and so on and so forth.

So I had no simply political or capricious idea around why I should discount white feminism. There's many white feminists, anthropologists, who were actually initiators of that turn, that post-modern turn. I learned a lot from their work. Susan Gall takes on Levi Strauss on the binary opposites. For me, that was simply brilliant. I don't necessarily think that an identity politics that excludes white feminism just for default is generative. And [laughs]. And. The ways in which the statement of unity, for instance, that came out of the Women's March leadership was very, very offensively speaking of disability, and I mean in the perpetual framework that we are portrayed, which is dependence, in need of care, we're not producers, we're not contributors, we're not workers, we're not mothers, we're not anything

except for recipients of charity and of care. So that was a punch in the stomach to begin with. But I wasn't surprised to say the least. I mean, I wasn't surprised; I was hurt as I always am, and I was infuriated. But I wasn't surprised. And then that was followed by the removal of sex workers from the statement of unity from the Women's March. So I mean [laughs], you know that is also saying that disabled women aren't sex workers, which is not true.

I feel that there was already in me a rejection to this very white platform of the Women's March, which absolutely had, had--but listen, pay attention to what I'm saying--had Black women participate in the leadership because it looks good, because it's convenient. And again, it's not decentering whiteness, but it's tokenizing blackness. I was already very disillusioned with the leadership. I'm not talking about the show-up. I'm not gonna talk about the constituents, the actual women who took to the streets. I'm talking about the leadership of the march. And I do know that there was a lot of disabled women that were creating actions and initiatives around the Women's March and who were saying, "Well, we're gonna march. We're here. We're gonna march." And they were creating their own platforms and constituents and talking about the importance of disabled women and debunking the myth that disabled people in general, but disabled women, are only recipients of care and/or charity and/or pity and/or so on and so forth.

I was mesmerized by it. I always see the ways in which our collective forms of resilience are simply amazing, not because they do something that is out of the world or because they do something that is "inspirational," but because that is the ways in which we live in the everyday. So we're just taking to the streets and doing what we do every day. Resilient, but we're sort of using this platform of the Women's March to once again highlight the fact that we are perpetually excluded and neglected from leadership in organizing social movements. So anyway, that was my feeling the whole time, and I was reading different articles: [Emily Ladau wrote a really wonderful article around it](#), and many others did too. And there were ones that were wonderful about disabled women who could not participate either because they're neurodivergent or chronically ill and couldn't be physically present at the march, so how to be involved and how to follow up with the disability constituency in the march. All of those things for me are always beautiful, and they do not represent anything surprising for me [chuckles]. They just are the ways that we fight against these things in the everyday.

So I'm very accustomed to seeing our disability communities come out and do what we need to do, right? Even 60+ years after the disability rights movement. But all of these initiatives are now so infused with disability justice and these wonderful multiplicity of ideas and multiplicity of tactics and strategies that are so beautifully put out there by Patty Berne and other people at Sins Invalid. And I think that more and more people in the disability communities are taking on disability justice initiatives, and I think that's wonderful.

Gloria Steinem, her speech began really, really, really well. I'm not gonna sit here and just judge her because she's a white feminist. Again, I don't believe that we need to extricate white women from the struggle. It's all our struggle. It's all women's struggle, including trans women and non-binary people. So I was like, "OK, well, she's mentioning Bernie Sanders, and she's mentioning Hillary, and she's mentioning other women." I mean, I don't remember exactly who she mentioned. It was mostly white people, but it's OK [laughs].

Suddenly, she starts talking about 45. And the way that she talked about 45 was so utterly demonizing to people with mental illness and to the community mental health movement, the mad pride movement. It was just simply so derogative and such a political tool, like such a populist, political tool for getting to demonize one person who actually enjoys the most the benefits of whiteness and the benefits of wealth, the benefits of all of these intersections of privilege. And to call for the psychiatric establishment to actually issue an order to institutionalize this person because they show outright hate and bigotry.

So the conflation of hatred and bigotry with mental illness and neurodiversity to me was hands down the most egregious and the most dehumanizing tactic. It's something that seems to be important for this person's platform, leadership platform at the expense, at the material, concrete expense of people in the community mental health movement and the mad pride movement and people with mental illness, neurodivergent people seeking access to dignified, humanizing services. What does that do? What does that do to Black, queer, disabled women seeking access to mental health services in the everyday? What does the conflation of white hatred and bigotry with mental illness, what does that do to the realities of people in the everyday who are always already marginalized, always already isolated, always already stigmatized? I mean, what does that do to women? If it's the Women's March, what is white saviorism in this case doing to women without necessarily having to address the desperate state of Black

and Brown women around the world? You don't need to even talk about that. All you have to do is demonize a white person, a white male in this such way that the ripple effects obviously will fall on Black and Brown disabled queer women. You don't have to think very hard about it to actually know that that's gonna happen or that's happened already. So increasing stigma and totally foreclosing dignified treatment and access and humanizing caring for the disability constituency, the various disability communities seeking access to mental health services. So you don't need to be very explicitly a white savior in talking about Black and Brown women around the world and how we are oppressed, and we are victimized, and we need white saviorism to get us out of our very violent, disparaging, horrible lives.

I'm not gonna say that the lives of Black and Brown queer disabled women around the world are excellent or that are quality of life or that our access to community representation, to community leadership, to basic, everyday life needs is easy or wonderful or beautiful or rosy. But we don't need a white woman to want to save us from these. What I do think is that we need white women to talk to other white women and those white women to talk to other white women. And those white disabled queer women to talk to other white disabled queer women about the value of multiplicity, about the value of getting together in collectivity and in bringing on perspectives that are incomplete. We are always incomplete without each other, I think. So whatever I think as a Brown disabled straight cisgender woman will be fully incomplete without the perspective of a Brown disabled queer transgender woman.

CHERYL: You used the word "liberation" earlier.

SARA: Yes.

CHERYL: Which is very meaningful. Integration and inclusion don't go far enough. When you're talking about when you look at Gloria Steinem and that speech, she's using language and thought as a weapon against people, but she's using the identical weapon that has been used against her.

SARA: Yes.

CHERYL: The history of hysterical, crazy, emotionally unstable against all women all women. Then you add in anyone who's non-binary, gender fluid, transgender, and we want to pathologize their entire existence and tell them that they're wrong about their experiences, who they are.

SARA: Oh, yeah, yeah.

CHERYL: Right? Then you go back to the 1850s, and I'm sure much before that, with codifying mental illness diagnoses against African people and people of African descent for being human and just pathologizing everything they could.

SARA: Yes. Yeah. You know what I think, Cheryl? Legitimately I think that Gloria Steinem cares for women's issues at large, not only white women's issues. I do think that. What I also think is that our histories, the history of disability, continues to be so marginalized within intellectual circles, within social justice movements on the ground, within feminist issues, within political theory, within philosophy. And that's what I think happened to Gloria in her speech. It's just not even within the realm of awareness and consciousness. But when is that enough of a good excuse to continue on this path of using a weapon that's actually been used, like you say, against us, against women throughout history, against a white man [laughs]?

CHERYL: Yeah.

SARA: I think that a lot comes from outright ignorance and not knowing. I also think that that is personal responsibility to people with access to intellectual conversations like she does, to education like she does, to having the privilege to simply sit around and discuss these things, which I have, and I know you have, and we both have. I think that that's a pretty good platform to depart and to start digging and looking, and there's certainly a wealth of materials out there authored by disabled people, disabled feminists, Black feminists, transgender women on issues of disability. Enough so that I just don't buy it anymore.

Meryl Streep's Tears for Serge Kovalski and Erasing Disability

CHERYL: See? I'm on the same page with you because I talked to someone recently who defended Meryl Streep for her public performance of crying over-

SARA: Ay ay ay.

C:--I'm gonna say his name: Serge Kovalski. The media doesn't seem to wanna say his name; even left-wing media won't say it in general. But her public performance about her heartbreak and that she cries about him being made fun of by 45. I thought, you know? Do you cry about the Autistic people at the Judge Rotenberg Center who carry their own batteries around to get shocked by staff? Like, I don't think Serge needs you to cry for him. And also, none of need you to cry for Serge. But the friend who was defending Meryl: Well, she doesn't know; she hasn't been exposed yet. And I'm with you that it sounds like Gloria Steinem is not politicized around

disability. It sounds like Meryl Streep is not politicized around disability. But I am not satisfied with that because that--

SARA: Absolutely not [laughs]!

CHERYL: So you can wanna defend these women all you want, but then I think get angry about the fact that it is so easy for them to be so active for as long as they have and still not heard about it.

SARA: And you know, I just have this quote that I wanna share with you from *Disability Incarcerated*. It is Nirmala Erevelles's chapter, which is called *Crippin' Jim Crow: Disability, Dislocation, and the School-to-prison Pipeline*. There is something here that really, really got me. It shocked me, and it has to do with evoking Kristeva's concept of the abject in naming disability issues as the abject within critical theory, within critical thinkers' debates. Like we're still the abject so much so that it seems like there's no responsibility on the part of these critical thinkers that are theorizing about difference, in so many intersecting ways, and they're still missing disability. So she writes--and it's on *Crippin' Jim Crow*, page 83. And I wanna say *Disability Incarcerated: Imprisonment and Disability in the United States and Canada* by Liat Ben-Mosch, Chris Chapman, and Allison Carey. I just wanna name them because they're the editors. So Nirmala writes, "Even within radical social theory, disability continues to be perceived as the natural side of abnormality and fearsome difference: the abject. Drawing on psychoanalytic theory, Julia Kristeva argues that the abject threatens our illusory notions of the autonomous, normative self because it represents those terrifying aspects of the 'other' (see disability) that disturbs identity, system, and order."

I'm with you in the fact that it's not satisfying. It's simply not satisfying to me.

Pride and Community

CHERYL: So we've done lots of nice critiques of feminists and activists who leave disability out of the social justice conversation. Tell me about some of the things you're working on that you're most proud of right now.

SARA: I think that what makes me proud about myself is that I have built this amazing network with various disability communities, not only in the United States but also in Spain, also in Colombia, also in other parts of the world. But yes, my first connections were with disability communities in the United States, and I have made so many wonderful friendships. Why does that make me proud? Especially it really motivates, and it really strengthens my own resilience. You know that a lot of us deal with a lot of isolation for

many reasons. I mean, we need to take care of our brains. We need to take care of our bodies that are not producing at the rates that the capitalist world or the capitalist culture, mentality would want us to produce. So we use a lot of spoons, right? Like the Spoon Theory says. Having each other to bounce off ideas and ideas about our movement. But not only ideas about our movement, but ideas about ourselves, which actually make the movement. That's the thing. It's like our lives our politicized [chuckles] I feel because they're inherently so. I feel our identities are always already political. So it's so wonderful to have other people. I'm gonna say it. I'm gonna say it. Yeah, it's easy to have like-minded people to talk to, and it's easy to have like-minded people to rant with, and it's easy to do all these things when you feel depleted, and when you come from the outside world, which I think it's neuro-hostile. [NAME] Rosa says this: The world is neuro-hostile. And you come home to a refuge where you can gather in community, even online. Yes! And see Cheryl's kitty through the video. And I think that makes me really proud, to have actively, actively and throughout many years, built this network.

I came to the United States in 2009, and that's when I started really connecting with other people. It was very new for me, you know, Cheryl. It was the first time that I really had an entry point to the world of disability studies, which then obviously traces back and to grassroots disability communities who have actually built into disability studies. So I'm really proud of that.

I'm really proud of having been shedding tons and tons of layers of conditioning that then get me closer and closer and closer to my Autistic self. And I'm gonna tell you it's not easy mainly because there's a lot of dissonance. There's a lot of dissonance between what I've been told, what I've grown up with, what I've been told I have to do, I have to be, and I have to say to be a "successful" person. And the pullings, the inner pullings of my soul and my body and all that I am is so much so alive and in there. It's in there. So shedding is difficult. There's a lot of days where I have a lot of self-doubt like I said before, like survival guilt and even thinking I'm taking somebody else's place who needs it, and I don't need it. And I'm just proud to continue to do the work, to shed, to shed, which is not easy. But I don't do that on my own. I do that with the Autistic community and other people in the disability community who are--I don't know how it is, but—we're always there. Even when we have really difficult things to go through or tend to, like everybody else in the world, we're always kind of there for each other. When it's not one person, it's another person.

And so I am definitely grateful for getting the stamina out of I don't know where, or the energy to build a disability studies initiative at my university, which is being met with a lot of objection, a lot of pats on the back that don't really lead anywhere: "Oh, yeah, yeah! This is great!" And then there's nobody else incorporating that in their own work. To me, that's tokenizing if you're always expecting the same person who is disabled to do the work [laughs] as opposed to really incorporating and doing your own research. That's the thing. Once you learn about it, once you hear the first thing, like Meryl Streep should be out doing all the research and reading about disability on her own. I mean, that's how I feel, and that's how I feel other colleagues and faculty and people at my university should be doing. And I don't see that happening. So anyway, I'm grateful for having the stamina, for having the supports in the community, and for having all the wonderful people that I invited come to CIIS to speak about disability justice issues. I recently had Leroy Moore come again, for the second time. I had Patty Berne and other people from Sins Invalid in the past. I just wanna continue to build that for as long as I can [laughs]. So yeah, that's what I would say. And I'm proud of having this conversation with you, actually. I thought it was really exciting that you asked me to do it!

CHERYL: Oh, yay! Yeah.

SARA: Ever since the whole speech and before that, I was feeling really, really tender around how such a huge movement and such a big thing, right--it was big phenomena--was still not looking at disability in ways that would be meaningful to disabled people, not meaningful to them. To say, "Oh, let's name disability 'cause yeah, that looks good. Let's check all the -isms, and then talk about them."

CHERYL: Right. Although they didn't address it as an -ism. They addressed it as don't forget that a lot of women work in the service industry of taking care of disabled people.

SARA: It's like, OK, that's great. I guess nobody else, no other disabled woman does anything.

CHERYL: No, no. I mean, let's just be honest. You and I don't do anything ever.

SARA: We just sit here and talk about things, and we write on Facebook, and we do nothing. People take care of us, so they need to get their benefits.

CHERYL: Right. I mean, it's not even really me talking today.

SARA: No, no. Me neither. I don't know where this all comes from [laughs]. Well, I feel very uplifted by other disabled women all the time. So I do have to say that we do collectivize, and we do politicize ourselves even further around these issues. I think that that's what we've always done.

CHERYL: Oh, wonderful. Well, thank you so much for being so generous with your time and everything that you said. I appreciate it.

SARA: I had a lot of fun talking to you. Thank you to the radio show for having this.

Closing

CHERYL: Thanks for joining me for another episode of Stories from the brainreels. Find more handy info on brain injury and disability art and culture and transcripts of all the podcast episodes WhoAmIToStopIt.com.

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