

Stories from the brainreels podcast transcript

January 2, 2017

[music]

Introduction

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

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Please forgive the long intro. We've been on break for a couple months and need to catch up!

Even though "brain" is still in the name of this podcast, you can probably tell by now that the focus hasn't been on brain injury specifically for a pretty long time. There are lots of blogs and podcasts you can go to if you want stories focused just on brain injury. My move came partly because I don't want to be too stuck in the medical and rehab worlds; I like to talk more about culture, politics, and society. The other reason is that people with brain injuries are so often narrowed down to just that: you're a brain injury! Or in the best case, you're a brain injury community member! And that's about it. But brain injury doesn't happen in a vacuum. And it most certainly doesn't happen only to well-off white people, as you might suspect it does if you take a look at most of the brain injury media out there, including my work.

To me, if you want to learn about and truly serve the brain injury community, that means getting involved with issues around poverty, houselessness, prison, domestic violence, food justice, LGBTQIA justice, police brutality, and ending ableism and inaccessibility, which is stuff that I regularly write about [on the blog](#) and share on [the Facebook page](#). But you can't stop there because each of these issues is also about racial justice. That should never be separated out from any other issue.

Many TBI activists point out that brain injury doesn't discriminate; it can happen to anyone. But that's misleading. Because of long-standing social inequities that are rooted in racism, classism, and more, while brain injury could happen to anyone, Black, Native American, and poor people who have a brain injury have significantly worse outcomes than well-off white people like me. Brain injury might not discriminate. But we certainly know how to discriminate against people who have them and keep the resources so unevenly distributed that some people get even more discrimination before, during, and after brain injury-related events.

Last thing: Please remember that TBI also happens to D/deaf people and blind people, and that TBI can lead to deafness or blindness. And so TBI-related media ought to include stories from and be accessible to those, and other, communities whether it's from people who have a brain injury or not. Let's take in stories from lots of different communities on a regular basis.

Which leads me to the complete gift of an episode that I have for you today: My conversation with Talila Lewis. This conversation will also be aired on KBOO Community Radio's Bread and Roses feminist news and public affairs program on January 6th. Check that one out for some music that I don't have the rights to play on the podcast, especially "We No Hear" featuring Deaf rappers WAWA and Sho'Roc that will play at the very end of the show on January 6th.

Thank you [to Jahzzar](#) for some music today. And be sure to check out the blog and the transcript at [WhoAmIToStopIt.com](#).

Talila "TL" Lewis has been named a White House Champion of Change and was also named one of the Top 30 Thinkers Under 30 by Pacific Standard in 2015. Talila is an attorney-organizer and visiting professor who founded and works with [the all-volunteer organization HEARD](#), which stands for Helping Educate to Advance the Rights of Deaf communities. HEARD focuses on correcting and preventing deaf wrongful convictions, ending abuse of incarcerated people with disabilities; decreasing recidivism rates for deaf returned citizens; and increasing representation of deaf people in professions that can counter mass incarceration and end the attendant school to prison pipeline.

Talila created the only national database of deaf incarcerated individuals. This is something the jails and prisons aren't tracking themselves. Talila also maintains contact with hundreds of deaf incarcerated individuals. TL also leads intersectional campaigns that advance the rights of multiply-marginalized people, including the #DeafInPrison Campaign, the Deaf Prisoner Phone Justice Campaign, and the American Civil Liberties Union's "Know Your Deaf Rights" Campaign. Talila doesn't work in isolation but in a place of interdependence and community, amplifying the work of others in the various communities Talila belongs to and advocates for and with.

The show page and transcript will have a link to the syllabus TL created and uses for a class called [Disability Justice in the Age of Mass Incarceration](#). There will also be a link to an interview TL did with Sarika Mehta's Intersections Radio in the second episode in a series called [Deaf \(in\)Justice](#) where they talk much more in depth about HEARD's work and rights and justice for Deaf and disabled people who are incarcerated. Today's interview and Sarika's interview are both transcribed.

TL: I'm a visiting professor at Rochester Institute of Technology, but also National Technical Institute for the Deaf, which is one of the nine colleges that's housed at RIT.

CHERYL: How long will you be teaching there or working there?

TL: I'm not sure. I tend to be a person who goes where I'm needed. So if someone calls me elsewhere, I'll go. 'Cause I think that the information that I share with folks, it shouldn't stay in one location.

Unpacking assumptions

CHERYL: You work with communities who are Deaf, DeafBlind, DeafDisabled and Hard of Hearing. You work in a lot of communities. I think larger society feels like all of this is just somebody's personal problem or shortcoming or medical condition, and they just need to fix it. But you look at systemic and institutionalized oppression and creating justice. I'd love if you talk about maybe unpacking those assumptions and how you work.

TL: The first assumption that I'd like to lay to rest, this one assumption, and that's that any individual in any of the communities in which I live or work--so whether we're talking about the trans and gender non-conforming communities, the Deaf, DeafBlind, DeafDisabled, Hard of Hearing communities, the Disabled or Blind communities, and the list continues: Black and people of color, low or no income, you name it. I mean, there's all of these different societally-forced marginalized communities. Often, we'll just term a community a "marginalized" community--and this isn't the assumption I wanna lay to rest, but I guess it is one that I will lay to rest--that the onus is not on those individuals to rid themselves of this oppression. The onus is on all of those individuals around them who have literally laid to waste their

bodies and their communities and their hearts and their dreams and all of these things that we know get crushed by this mass marginalization of so many communities. So I guess I'll start there.

But the assumption that I was talking about initially is the assumption that all of these communities are single-issue communities. So often when someone says "disabled," everyone's like, "Oh! A wheelchair user!" When someone says "Deaf," they're like, "Oh, Nyle DiMarco," the white, dancing, famous Deaf person. But always white, right? It's very, very normalized to think white everything. Everything is white. Everyone is white. And it's dangerous to our communities.

So even when you look at the LGBTQI communities, the trans and gender non-conforming communities, the problem with this assumption that everything's white, everyone is white, is that the intersectional issues get not just erased or glossed over, but in fact, they almost always purposely get put on the back burner. "We'll handle that race issue a little bit later, after we handle the access component for Deaf and Disability communities. We'll handle that race issue after we get same sex marriage." So these sorts of conversations that really just are direct forms of violence from within the communities that allegedly are representative of the larger swath of the community, which is always going to be multiply-intersectional for a number of reasons.

So I think the single-issue assumption and the white assumption are the two assumptions that I think are most critical to throw out the window and really get our gears turning and thinking a lot more critically. I call it critical intersectionality because I think often I think this word has now just become so common, at least in a lot of spaces, and people throw it out. But are people actually practicing critical intersectionality? Are people really unpacking constantly? Not so much. Not even in a lot of the communities that are some of the most "activist."

I'll give an example of that. This is not to, in any way, demean or devalue the work of a lot of these entities. I wanna say that up front. Often people think when you present issues or problems with approaches to advocacy that you are somehow devaluing the work that has been done, and that's not at all what it is. When people present concerns about different advocacy approaches, it's really out of love. I think that love should be centered in everything that we do.

So I wanna call out. And I've had direct conversations with the folks involved in this organization. Black Lives Matter obviously have done amazingly critical work, and in a lot of ways, they are encompassing a lot of the different intersections that we'll find in our different communities: Black trans communities, Black LGBTQI communities, Black women. But also, other communities, other intersections of the Black communities, Black Muslim community, and so on and so forth. The one community that tends to always be left out of the conversation with Black Lives Matter is Black disabled individuals.

If you know anything about oppression, structural and systemic oppression, and how it works, you understand that ableism, audism, sanism--So those are discriminations based on perceived ability or ability; based on perceived ability to hear, inability to hear and/or speak; and also based on alleged mental health status, perceived or real. So those are those three: ableism, audism, and sanism. That's what they mean in brief.

Those are the things that get glossed over, but what's critically important is that those oppressions, any sort of ability-based oppression, is structurally rooted in racism and is structurally rooted in classism. And of course, all of these oppressions have all sorts of interplay. They depend on one another, and they can't live without the other. That being said, if you address one or two without addressing ableism, you're actually just not going to make any headway. That's because they are literally inextricably linked.

So a lot of even the more progressive groups, coalitions, collectives are really just missing this memo about true critical intersectionality and disability solidarity.

The Harriet Tubman Collective and Disability Solidarity with The Movement for Black Lives

CHERYL: Yeah. I recently read an [open letter from The Harriet Tubman Collective](#). Are you in that collective?

TL: Yes, I played a role in drafting that letter, yeah.

A lot of people actually struggled with the level that it was written at. So that's one of our critiques of ourselves, is how can we be more accessible? We thought we were doing a pretty good job, but we didn't quite hit it. So even asking those kinds of questions like what can we do better?

So the Harriet Tubman Collective is a group of all Black Deaf, Disabled, Deafblind individuals who are really actively seeking liberation through disability solidarity. So disability solidarity is all communities working toward disability justice and intersectional justice. So focusing on making sure that the disability community is working toward racial and economic justice, working to dismantle other oppressive structures and systems while simultaneously holding all communities accountable. So Civil Rights organizations, for example, or collectives that focus on economic justice, holding all of ourselves accountable for disability justice. So that's what disability solidarity is. It's making sure that everyone is accountable to everyone.

Our originating group is 17 people in the collective. We worked together to create what we called "Completing the Vision for Black Lives" in response the Movement for Black Lives' platform [entitled] Vision for Black Lives, which came out and discussed a number of policy and issues that they want to be addressed and very specific areas in which they wanted society to pay attention and take action. And they named a number of different marginalized groups, and what was left out was disability.

So all of us Black, disabled activists called them in, and we had some conversations about it. We were asking that they change the language and include disability in the platform statement because this is a statement that's now being distributed across the world at this point, and it's lacking a critical disability justice lens. So it was our response to say, "You know, Black Disabled people are disproportionately represented in perpetually impoverished communities, underserved education-wise communities, in police brutality, in carceral settings, and not just by a small margin. We're talking a huge disproportionate representation of people with disabilities in each of those.

In the "foster care system." I don't like calling it foster care. We need to find another term for that. In some states, California, it's a 75% rate of people who are incarcerated previously were wards of the State in the foster care system. Again, why we don't need to be calling it foster "care." Obviously, something's not going right there. So anyhow, all of these things are connected, and I think that's, again, the point of this conversation. It'll all come back to this interconnectedness of all of these oppressions and how they play on one another, how they depend on one another, and how we can't achieve liberation without discussing any.

And finally, and most importantly, how erasure of disability is an act of violence. Our response to the Movement for Black Lives platform, "Completing the Vision for Black Lives," was really bringing this other perspective that is critical to understanding the society, to understanding oppression, and to moving forward to collective liberation.

CHERYL: Thank you for bringing the context in, and I will link to that letter in the episode transcript and on the show page too. Ableism really is a very powerful tool for white supremacy. One of the ways that we, as white people, can subjugate people of color is to say, "You are less than. You have some kind of disability just in your inherent being. You are less smart, you are less capable in this, that." I mean we just give somebody a disability in order to justify well, of course they're inferior. And so it's always been a tool, all the way back from diagnoses like drapetomania to the present day where we, as white people, keep trying to reinforce a standard of goodness or normalcy that will always exclude anyone who's not white by default.

TL: Right, yeah. I think it's important to name that scientific racism and scientific ableism are essentially one and the same. So while they, at least on their face theoretically, are discussing different constructed identities, really you can't separate the two. So the eugenicists movement that really Nazi Germany pulled from the United States--which often people kind of gloss over that or miss it all together--and everybody wants to point at all of these other countries and their mass genocidal campaigns. White men here in the United States created scientific oppression, scientific genocide, scientific categories that created the standards of "normalcy." To understand the history of this United States of America, "these United States,"*sarcasm* it's impossible to understand it without understanding and naming disability, race, and class *at least*. Those are the very bare minimum of what we would need to be unpacking and understanding. Even when you look at understanding enslavement, when you understand forced familial separation, when you understand mass genocide, when you understand mass incarceration, how can you not discuss disability in that and intergenerational trauma?

Trauma is a cause and consequence of disability. Poverty is a cause and consequence of trauma. And the cycle just continues and repeats itself. That's the missing component of all of our struggles for liberation is this erasure of disability, the subjugating of disability, the hiding of disability instead of honoring it as a full and complete part of who most of us, if you've been perpetually oppressed, are. Even when you look at health outcomes and access to "health care," mental health care, poverty, disability and race, are all implicated. Even when you look at diagnosis: So whether it's a diagnosis, a misdiagnosis, or a non-diagnosis, all of those are rooted in classism, ableism, and racism.

Most of the time, for example, news media or even "activists," when I try to have these conversations with them, it's, "You're just getting into the weeds," "I'm not sure that it's actually that intertwined," "Ableism? Mmmm, I'm not sure. I don't think we really need to get to that at this point. We really need to focus on racism." So a lot of the same kind of excuses that white people have used to kind of push back our day of liberation as far as racial equality and economic equality go. It's the same excuses that we're hearing from white and Black and other people of color about why ableism isn't a big deal. That sort of dismissal is pretty common and really, really detrimental and violent and exhausting for all of us who are in this space, trying to work toward all of our liberation.

Questions for groups to ask to determine if they practice Disability Solidarity

CHERYL: On one of your blog posts, you have a list of questions that groups can ask themselves. OK, I'm a group doing racial justice. Am I being anti-ableist too? And here, I'm a disability-related group. Am I being anti-racist? You're not saying, "Here I am. I have all your answers and solutions," but putting the tools in people's hands to understand why this is a collective thing.

TL: Yeah. Thanks for naming that. I've got a group of all Black and POC Deaf and Deafblind and Deaf Disabled individuals working on an ASL translation of that with me right now. So I'm really, really just so humbled and so thankful for their hands and their hearts and their contributions to this project and

really just believing in the vision and supporting my work and my efforts and really supporting one another and honoring one another through this work. It's been several months that we've been working on this project. So there must be more than 20 Deaf and Deafblind people from all across the nation who have contributed in translating that English article that you're referencing into sign to make it accessible.

We *all* need the ASL video! Who doesn't need an ASL video about social justice, right? When you think about it, why wouldn't you do that? If someone tells you there's a way for you to make your content actually accessible to everyone, wow, mind blowing! Yes, go! How do we do it? And because I'm actually *in* community, I'm able to reach out and say, "Here's the project that I'm working on. Does anyone have the capacity, the interest, the willingness? I'm happy to pay." I like to pay people of color for their time because I know it never happens. In this case, I offered, I said, "I would like to pay you all. I don't want you all just working for free. Your labor, your time is really important and valuable, and in this capitalistic society, I would like to pay you." But I'm in community, and they said, "TL! No, we're honored. Let's go. Let's do this together."

It's not just the translation of the article. We're developing a social justice ASL terminology glossary in English for all of us people who need to learn it from English to sign, and also in sign language. And that's all part of the process. That's beautiful, and that's what this is about. It's about the journey, it's about the community, it's about the love that envelops us throughout that course, it's about what we learn about ourselves and others. It's about collaboration across the lines.

I guess the second related point to that is how me and others who are on the ground, doing the work or experiencing the violence and trauma, when we present it, we're often met with the comments of, "Where's the source for that? How do you know that? Is there anything written on that, that you can share with me so I can understand it better and understand what really is going on?" It's like this devaluing of stories, of narratives, of lived experiences, complete injustice, complete violence, erasure of our whole existence. For folks who are experiencing the trauma, why is my story not source enough for you? Why is that mother's story not source enough for you? Why is this advocate's story not source enough for you?

The stories that don't have enough sources don't get any attention. No one will bring cases. So it can't ever be documented or memorialized, and it disappears into the abyss as though it never happened. And then it continues to happen. Again, these cycles are not new, nothing has changed in centuries, and I'm not sure other than to get folks like yourself who are in places of privilege on board with stopping the violence and unpacking how we can end that cycle. So a lot of the work that I do is trying to disrupt these cycles of violence through and through, not just one space or the other, but every single area, all of us need to be working on ourselves, which will actually heal the entire world.

CHERYL: I feel like when you look at, well first of all, around disability, everybody thinks that all disability community wants is services and access to services. But then, the people funding the services, and the people giving the services are primarily white and often non-disabled and writing their missions about a group or groups that they're not part of.

TL: When you look at the struggle for liberation, Black liberation, trans liberation, etc., what we understand is that the assumptions around those struggles for liberation are very similar to the assumptions around disability. What do people with disabilities want? Oh, those services. Just make sure they've got the ramp. Just make sure they have that interpreter, which really, let's be clear, another one of my large frustrations about the approach to understanding disability is the assumption that the

disability belongs to the individual. When really, the disability, frankly, belongs to the entire community. Why? Because the Deaf person's mind and information is critically important to the entire community, and if you are a non-signing individual, or you're not communicating in a way that works for the entire community, then that means the community is suffering. That means the access need belongs to the community.

If you can't communicate one way, why would the onus be on the individual who communicates a different way, as opposed to saying, "You know? I think we need an interpreter, not you, not me. We collectively need an interpreter in this space so I can understand you, you can understand me, and we can all get free!" To me, it's so simple.

But this conversation about services. It's not about services for anyone of these different marginalized populations or multiply-marginalized populations. It's really all about liberation. How can we get free? What does freedom look like to you?

I think that's the question we should be asking all of these different communities and all these communities that have these intersecting identities. 'Cause if you ask that question, and you get the right answers to those questions, which everyone's gonna have a different vision and dream of freedom and liberation. And that's great. Then, it's like how can we all work together toward all of those visions of freedom and liberation? I think that's the critical question that tends to not get asked because it's like you said, everyone's making the decisions for the marginalized population. The people in positions of power don't belong to marginalized populations.

It's not just good enough to have good intentions because impact is everything. I'd rather you just leave everyone alone than to come in high and mighty, riding your horse with no humility, without having unpacked your privileges. Liberation. Liberation. We should all just repeat again and again, "Freedom and liberation. What is that to you?"

Deafness and disability and the school to prison pipeline

CHERYL: So talking about how people with disabilities and Deaf people are overrepresented in foster care, that system. But also in jails and prisons. Can you talk about the interaction of deafness and disability with the school to prison pipeline in particular?

TL: So the first thing that I'll say is in the adult prison population, last I checked, no less than 60% of the adult prison population is illiterate. When you look at kid prisons, what we're looking at is a percentage point of, last I checked, 85% illiteracy, not literacy. *Illiteracy*. What that easily, without even expanding more, is indicating to me, at least, as a person who works with young people, as a person who works in Deaf and disability communities, who sees the lack of access to education that has always occurred for disabled and D/deaf populations, particularly disabled and D/deaf children, babies, and youth of color, is that what we're talking about in the carceral system is lack of access to opportunities: education, lack of access to understanding of the individual child, what their learning style is, what disabilities they do or don't have--"disabilities," right?--*differences* in learning, *differences* in approaches to how their mind functions, etc. That not being understood leads to criminalization of our children at very young ages.

So in New York, Black children make up 18% of the preschool population, preschool, right? So they come to about your knee. They're tiny, little children, beautiful minds that are ready to learn and ready to just explore the world. 18% are Black children in New York. 48% of children who are preschoolers who are

suspended in New York are Black children. Those are the children who have more than one suspension. So the percentage point for one suspension would be higher.

But unpacking that statistic requires not just that we ask what's up with this disproportionality in suspension, but two, why are we suspending preschoolers? And three, what's going on with disability or so-called disability in that section of children who are being penalized for existing. We have to be clear about this: "Oh, we penalize them because they were not following instruction." *No, no, no.* You literally penalized these children because they were breathing. Because there's no reason, regardless of the age, to be suspending, expelling, and arresting children. And *that's* what we're doing all across the nation. So I believe we can fill up 47 Super Bowl stadiums a year with suspended children. This is completely unacceptable.

So it's this punishment, it's this punitive culture that we're obsessed with here in the United States, that really doesn't work. What works with children, what works with all humans, is love. That's what works if we're trying to make sure that people are healthy, that communities are healthy, that communities stay together and stay strong. We don't need police. We don't need zero tolerance policies in schools. What all of those things do is actually further oppress people, make it more difficult for children to be able to learn successfully, and if you happen to be a child with multiply-marginalized identities--particularly if you're a student with disabilities--restraint and seclusion is used against you disproportionately. Which is traumatizing, which leads to more disability, which means it's harder for you to go to class because why would you wanna show up at school when you're being abused?

It means that you're being expelled disproportionately, arrested disproportionately, suspended disproportionately, that you're not having the same number of days in class as your peers, that the educational content that you should be getting, you're not getting 'cause maybe now you've been pushed off to another type of class that you shouldn't be in simply because you've been labeled as allegedly disabled, as allegedly having "special needs." Which there is no such thing as special needs, but I don't wanna get into that. But you understand my point. The point is that disabled children, especially disabled children with other marginalized identities, are being penalized literally for existing in all of our schools.

It's really heart-breaking, and it's so avoidable. The nation prior to settler colonialism, none of this violence actually existed. I think naming the violence that imperialism, colonialism, racism has exacted upon all of our communities, including white communities. Which I think is what's even more disturbing is that white people think they're exempt from the violence that comes down as a result of this perpetual oppression. But I think several of our great thinkers and culture leaders have made clear that white supremacy is not just damaging to Black and Brown communities. It's particularly damaging to white people who actually begin to buy into the myth of white supremacy. I think having conversations about that and unpacking what is the impact on white communities, particularly marginalized white people and marginalized white communities, is important in moving forward as well, as we try to unpack and discuss and realize disability justice and disability solidarity.

[music break]

Co-creators in the classroom

You really value and uplift the contributions of young people. When you teach, you don't refer to your students as "students," but you refer to them as "co-creators" of the classes, using language to dismantle some of the power dynamics that are in classrooms. So I would love for you to talk a little bit

about how you address these dynamics in the classroom and how you disrupt dynamics. And I'm interested how your co-creators respond to being seen as co-creators.

TL: Yeah, words matter.

So I call my students either co-creators or co-leaders depending on the day, depending on how I feel. I'm sure that will transform and evolve over time. I'm sure there's probably some sort of structural concerns about that as well, right? The idea of creating and leading, maybe there's some other terminology. But I think that's what's beautiful about the way my mind works, which many people would call it a disabled mind. But I think a lot of folks who are neurodivergent understand that our minds are beautiful and just different, and that's great and should be honored. So my mind is constantly thinking and rethinking and packing and unpacking and learning and relearning and unlearning, and that's great.

So co-leaders or co-creators of class.

Too often you see people in positions of power, which is anyone who "has the power" to lead a class, take for granted the critical importance of youth or whoever the other individuals are. It might not be youth who are in the class space, the "classroom community," is what I call it. But whoever you happen to be working with, take for granted that you can learn more from that group than you can often even begin to convey. So I enter classroom spaces with an open heart and an open mind, ready and willing to learn. I think just that dynamic, me coming in and saying, "What can you all offer me? Here's what I can offer you, but I wanna learn. I want to hear from you. Your stories are important. You are important. Your narrative is critically important to the nation, society, justice." For a student, so-called student, to come in and hear that really changes how they understand society, changes how they understand systems, changes how they dream about their own place in the world.

So my co-creators, co-leaders of the class really contribute so much more because they know that they *can*. They know that they won't be criticized, they won't be looked down upon, they won't be oppressed. And they know that if I do engage in any of those behaviors, that it is incumbent upon them to call me in. I let them know that from day one, and that's the way that classroom community in my world operates. I don't understand why that's not standard practice.

So even with the Twitter chats that I've worked to develop with the students, centering their voices is really what that's about. It's not about oh, let's create a hashtag #DeafEd and just let it take off. It's about how can we include these young folks who are the most impacted by all of our decision making and who *always* are the least involved in the decision making? How can we flip that on its head?

It's been really, really amazing to see the great advice that these young people have about what we can do differently. The changes that they're offering up are easy, are so easy to do and things that we, as adults, might not have even thought about simply because we're not in their space, we're not in their shoes, we're not seeing the world the way that they do.

And I think everyone comes away a better human being as a result of that, just that exchange, that sense of hey, we're all equal here. I can't imagine my world without them in it. I think that's what education should be about. It's not about oh, teacher of the year blah blah blah. It's about classroom community of the century [chuckles]! That's how I see it.

CHERYL: It's nice to hear the way you both use the language of co-learners, co-leaders, co-creators-- actually, I don't think you said co-learner, but--that you're using that language, but that you're also enacting that in a classroom community.

TL: Yeah, thank you for that. Co-learners is completely adequate as well. So I like that language. And again, I'm always looking to learn more and add to and change. If someone were to come to me today and say, "TL, that's an awful idea, and here's why," and if those points were valid, I'd say, "Oh my gosh. You're absolutely right." And I would probably go back to my students and say, "Hey. I made a mistake. Here's what we were doing. Here's the feedback I received. And here's why I think maybe we should change that moving forward. What do you think?"

So those open conversations, the vulnerability and the humility, the ability to just say, "You know, I think I might've messed up. It wasn't intentional, but I did. Here's what I'm gonna do, moving forward to change that. Here's what I'm gonna do to try to rectify that. What do you all think? How can I do better?" That's really all that people are looking for in these sorts of conversations. So it's a very interesting space to be in.

CHERYL: As you were talking, I was thinking what is it that allows you to be this open to it? And I was thinking you just must have so much confidence. But then you used the words "humility" and "vulnerability." I think, I mean confidence has to be in there, but I think that the willing to be humble and willing to be vulnerable is what can allow you to open up and ask for critique and ask to work together to change what you're doing.

TL: I consider it a gift to be shared with in a way that helps me improve myself and helps me improve the work that I'm doing and helps me improve society. That's a gift. It's a gift to be able to hold yourself accountable to all the communities to whom you can or have been doing harm or to whom you can avoid doing harm to. If someone comes in and says, "Here's how we can make sure that we don't oppress Deaf, Deafblind people," you should be all open to that. I am. I think it's a beautiful gift, and I think if people could shift their understanding of what it means to be called in, called out even, that's really what's necessary to move all these conversations forward and to really advance all of our liberation.

Radical inclusion and the privilege of “inclusion” and “normal”

CHERYL: Yeah, yeah. You have said that you're “committed to creating a new world that is driven by love and radical inclusion.” So you've talked about love and love and liberation, and I wanna talk about inclusion a little bit. The way we usually do inclusion, generally in the US, especially in education, is the most privileged groups will set the standards. This is what's normal or acceptable or good. And then, we will get to decide who's "includable." But if you can't or you don't or don't want to fit close enough to the standard, then you won't be included. Even in inclusive settings. I wanna hear your thoughts about what radical inclusion looks like and how it can be fostered.

TL: I think we all have to do away with the notion that there is such a thing as "normal." Normal is a problem and a privilege. It is a privilege to be considered “normal” in this society. It is a privilege to be considered includable in this society. It's a privilege to be able to determine who is includable and who is normal. And we have to start naming that. All of that ties back to ableism, racism, classism, trans-antagonism, Islamophobia. 'Cause all of those people who belong to any of those communities are not "normal." Radical inclusion means not having to think about inclusion ever, right? If you never have to think about who's included, who's the in group, who's the other group, who's the out group. The day

that we can stop using words like "diversity" and "inclusion," would mean that we've arrived at radical inclusion.

CHERYL: That's the point where we don't have to go down checklists to see who have we made this a welcoming space for, and who are we not-- Well, actually that's not what people usually ask. They usually ask, "Why aren't those people here? I thought we did outreach!" So even the idea of, "Let's outreach to these other communities we're not serving yet," even that comes from the regular inclusion mindset and not the radical inclusion mindset.

TL: Honestly, it is a dream world at this point, right? Radical inclusion is a practice; it's not a place. Regardless of where we are right now in this kind of battle to make sure that everyone is "included," it's just understanding that we'll never arrive there. Which means that we'll always be in struggle. We'll always be working toward that, which means we'll always be humble and open and willing to understand how we can do better.

One thing that I wanted to point out as related to this topic is about what you mentioned, this outreach. "Why aren't those people who [insert identity group] at the table? Why aren't they at our table?" As opposed to moving yourself to their table and understanding and unpacking and doing all of the work that's necessary to be in that space. But that's an uncomfortable space for so many people in privilege. And it doesn't matter what marginalized group you wanna throw into this boat, but that's what it is. It's like, "Oh, well, they didn't show up! We invited them. They didn't come." But there's a lot of structural reasons why marginalized communities do not find their way to your table, and there's a lot of structural reasons why your table should be dismantled.

Maybe we shouldn't have a table, 'cause tables actually are not the most accessible spaces! Even that metaphor is so problematic for many reasons. Maybe it's a bedroom space, or maybe it's the floor. Even just reimagining and reworking that language. It's an exercise in practicing critical intersectionality. It's an exercise in practicing denormalization of normal [chuckles]. So I think these are all really good exercises and beginning steps into this process of unpacking why are we not yet critically intersectional even in our most "progressive" social justice spaces?

CHERYL: I'm just picturing hacking down the table and making a fire pit and just [giggles]--

TL: Yes, that!

CHERYL: Stop. Stop. Like who's food were you planning on serving at the table?

TL: Is there food at the table? Or who gets the food? Because of course you'd need to have some sort of monetary...which I mean that goes all back to capitalism and how jacked up all of this imperialist capitalism and all these structures are. But yeah, throw the table into your fire pit. As long as there has to be a table, there's always gonna be people who are left out.

And it's really incredibly frustrating for me and other people who think like me. I'm not the only person whose mind works the way that it does. There's a lot of us. But too often we're shunned, we're pushed away, we're told that we need to relax, we're told that we're too anxiety-ridden, we're too dreamy, we're too aloof. I actually identify as a mad activist, mad in all of its connotations.

My point is just that we just need to really be critical of ourselves, and we should start with the "I" statements and not the others. But yeah, the whole kind of outreach, outreach, it's such a problem 'cause you're never gonna do the outreach in the way--especially nowadays with technology. People are

really convinced that you post something on Facebook, and everyone should know about it. I'm like, "Hello" [chuckles]. The privilege! The sheer privilege of thinking that Twitter and Facebook as your only means of social outreach are gonna reach the people that we need to reach. I just don't even have the words. The vast majority of all of our most marginalized communities are not in that space.

So instead of creating a table and saying, "Let's do outreach," *go to them*, find them, learn their languages, learn their cultures, be in their spaces, and that's what this should look like. But instead, it's the table that's not accessible with the door that's too narrow that the wheelchairs can't fit into, that doesn't have an interpreter around the table, that doesn't have tactile interpreting at the table, that doesn't have-- The list goes on and on and on and on. So we really do need to undo our thoughts surrounding how outreach and inclusion should look, I guess.

CHERYL: Yeah.

Deaf art from free and incarcerated Deaf people

As we wrapped up the call, TL took advantage of the video chat to show me a gorgeous array of visual arts on the walls outside TL's office. We started with a new logo for HEARD, which you can find as the banner image on HEARD's Twitter. Then we moved to look at some work created by free Deaf artists. The tour finished with many beautiful pieces created by Deaf people who are incarcerated. One of Talila's Deaf colleagues, who's a professor, and several other area Deaf artist-activists, go into the prison and do art there with the artists who are incarcerated. We took turns describing the images out loud: animals, trees, nature, hands, eyes, colorful swirls and spirals, all telling stories of a life behind bars. You can see some of the pieces I looked at by webcam at [Patti Durr's blog, HandEyes.Wordpress.com](http://PattiDurr.com) in the [post from January 17, 2016](#). Here's just a little bit of that art tour.

TL: I'm gonna show you art from a Deaf prisoner who's wrongfully convicted who I've been working on his case for 10 years. He decided to revamp HEARD's logo. His name is John Wilson, and this is the first case I ever worked on. He's the reason why I do all that I do. He's been incarcerated since September of 1994. He's still incarcerated in the federal system, and he is just an amazing human being. This is what he decided to do for HEARD. That says "freedom."

CHERYL: So you've got the word "HEARD," the fingerspelling spelling it out.

TL: See the hands under the word HEARD?

CHERYL: They are handcuffed, and they're kind of in between a prison.

TL: Yep. And the handcuff, if you look at the chain, it's actually being broken. So that sign under the HEARD is the sign for "want." So he's saying, "I want my freedom. I want my freedom." There's a light in this tower, and the light is shining on the hands that are signing "HEARD." This is a prison, and he says, "But HEARD is always behind the walls, uplifting the community who's Deaf incarcerated." And you should remember that the Deaf community is very visual. So many of them are beautiful artists, including Deaf incarcerated people.

So I'll show you some of the art from Deaf incarcerated folks in this area.

A quick note: In our excitement, TL and I both left out a very important point here. When we talk about Deaf community being very visual, we must always remember to name and honor that there are blind people in Deaf community (DeafBlind people) and that while many in the community are visual and/or

tactile, some in the community are neither for various reasons. This should be honored. TL asked that I point this out, and I'm more than happy to do that.

So a lot of the themes in Deaf art are hands, obviously. Eyes. So you'll see eyeballs, lots of eyes, and trees and ladders, and these primary colors are pretty critically important in Deaf art. But always hands. So that's important. Now, understand, these Deaf prisoners don't have any kind of innate knowledge of Deaf art and what that should be, but the things that they did were so tied to what these artists did that it's really like, "Oh my god. Of course! We're a community." And linking that humanity for these Deaf artists who are free people, they can't stop. So they go now twice a month. They are in prison more than me.

TL: So let's see.

CHERYL: Is that a beehive hanging out of that tree?

TL: Mmhmm. A beehive, birds, animals. One of the Deaf incarcerated folks who's also innocent, Felix Garcia, he was moved to a different prison at some point. He said, "I saw a tree for the first time in 25 years." He said, "All I could do was cry and hug it." I don't think free people-- Again, I created this concept called freedom privilege. It's something that's not discussed, but it needs to be because we're really missing a huge swath of what it means to be privileged. So this! So understand, Deaf incarcerated people who are being completely abused all the time, this is what they came up with.

It's like truly, they're humans, and I don't understand why people don't understand that. Here's another one. This one's really sad. Let me see if you can see it.

CHERYL: Oh, this person's got their hands chained, and they're covering their mouth. And the guards are there, screaming behind the person?

TL: Mmhmm. And they don't have ears. So they're indicating, "I'm Deaf." And the guards don't let them sign.

CHERYL: Right. So they have no voice with hands or mouth.

TL: Nope. No communication.

CHERYL: Oh, wow.

TL: And then this is the octopus.

CHERYL: [giggles]

TL: You'll find eyes all throughout this one.

CHERYL: Is the octopus in prison?

TL: Well, if you look at it, there's a lot of stuff going on.

CHERYL: Yeah.

TL: So there's two eyes here and hands. So I don't know if that's the octopus itself, another octopus, or if that's this person imagining themselves.

CHERYL: Oh, yeah!

TL: It's pretty intricate. You just have to pay close attention, and it's easier if you're actually here.

CHERYL: And what a smile. The octopus has a huge smile.

TL: Yeah. So yeah. This is the community building that I do.

Oh, and this last one. This is from a Deaf returned person, a person who got out of prison. So this is the sign for "arrest," so grabbing the hands. It's also if you wanna stop a Deaf person from communicating, you'll grab their hands. So it says, "Society's barriers to Deaf is arrest, is prison." Then you can see eyes again, the motif of eyes and the fingers. Then there's a poem here. But the last thing I'll tell you, which is really, really sad and interesting is that different sign languages are actually developed in prison systems because they're so isolated.

So in the same way back in the days of segregation, you probably don't know, during segregation, Black Deaf people developed sign [languages], and white Deaf people really were forced oral. But some of them had their own sign too. Then, when integration happened, Black people were expected to drop their language, pick up ASL, and move forward like nothing happened. So there's a lot of issues around that, which of course meant Black people now were behind again and playing catch up. In the prison system, because interpreters refuse to go in, the community kind of just abandons them, if there's multiple Deaf people in a prison system, they tend to develop their own language. And then also, because [sighted] Deaf in our community's really visual-- So my sign name's here, compared to when I go to Guatemala are different. So in Guatemala, because my skin is darker than everyone, this is actually my sign name [open hand moves in circle on the lower cheek]. Or here, it's "TL." That's my sign name here in the U.S.

The reason I brought all that up is 'cause my brain does associative leaps (smile). This poem is a Deaf person who was released, but right before he was released, explaining the scenario in the prison that all of these people are housed in. He uses the word "greens," he uses the word "white," and different colors to indicate people. So whereas in Louisiana, if you ask a Deaf prisoner, "What's the sign for 'inmate' there?" It's this [Y handshape sweeping down the shirt], and that's because "inmate" is written right on the side of their clothes. So "inmate," it indicates who you're talking about. Here, where I am, when I visit Deaf prisoners, the sign for inmate is green, like literally the color, 'cause that's the color of their clothes. So they call each other "green." So if they're talking about a prisoner, they'll say "inmate." The sign for inmate is actually green. The sign for CO, who's kind of higher up, is white. And blue for a more working class CO, 'cause they wear blue. So just very interesting different languages that develop because of the isolation. So it's not good at all, but different things that most people don't even realize. So yeah. So these are my family.

CHERYL: Oh yeah. Thank you for introducing me to their art at least [laughs].

TL: Yeah! So now you have it.

BOTH: [laugh]

CHERYL: TL also asked me to add that these intra-prison signs sometimes are closer to the free Deaf community's creation of regional signs. So it's not always the full creation of languages, especially now. There's so much technology that allows a bit more interaction between free and incarcerated people that even just a few years ago.

Wrap-up

I so appreciate your work. I appreciate the way you do it. I appreciate what you say. I appreciate you reminding me about love 'cause I will forget that when I just wanna be angry at everybody. And so I'm very grateful for the time and the energy you've given to talk to me today. Would you let people know where they can find you online?

TL: I have a new blog that I'm now gonna post some older articles on. The blog is talilalewis.com: T-a-l-i-l-a. I also am on Twitter [@talilalewis](https://twitter.com/talilalewis). I think those are the best places to follow my work. If you're interested in following my organizational work with HEARD, you can go onto Facebook and follow us at facebook.com/HEARDDC as in District of Columbia. Or you can follow us on Twitter [@BEHEARDDC](https://twitter.com/BEHEARDDC), Be HEARD DC.

CHERYL: Well, I can't thank you enough for your time and your generosity. Thank you.

TL: Thank you for indulging me and listening. I appreciate it.

CHERYL: Oh! Oh my gosh, yeah.

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 on my disability arts blog, WhoAmIToStopIt.com.

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