

# Crippling Capitalism: Disability, Feminism, & the Controversy of Work

March 11, 2015

## Introductions

CAITLIN: Hi! Thank you guys so much for coming. We're really excited to be here and present. Cheryl basically did the presentation herself. We brainstormed, but she came up with a really incredible, incredible presentation. So I'm super excited so.

CHERYL: Thank you. Welcome to Crippling Capitalism.

So we're just gonna start by introducing ourselves. Wanna go first?

CAITLIN: Sure. So I'm Caitlin Wood. I'm editor of "Criptiques." I'm a writer, activist, and other things. Cheryl and I have collaborated before on stuff. We did a project recently that was an extension of Criptiques called Criptiques On Film: Very Special Episodes. It's a web series. And we did an interview that actually just came out on Bitch Media's website yesterday. And they have a link to the episodes, and you can also just go to Criptiques.com to see them. But other than that, I'm just excited to be here. And thank you all for attending.

CHERYL: Yeah, thank you. And I put this slide together not realizing we were gonna be introduced.

CAITLIN: [giggles]

CHERYL: So now we're just being repetitive. But there's the Criptiques website, criptiques.com. And there's one of my websites. Well, you can't, boy, you really can't see it very well. StoryMinders.com. And really, I'm not just a filmmaker, I call myself a media artist because I do a lot of podcasting, blogging, and film all with an eye toward accessibility, both for the audience and for the performers. In terms of accessibility, I make Closed Captions, I do a lotta stuff around making accessible pdfs and other documents, little things that you can embed in documents and websites so they're accessible to blind people using screen readers, lots of different stuff around that. You can hire me to do that! And then I also do a lot of training around brain injury rehabilitation through the lens of brain injury culture. As well as rehabilitation, but always with an eye toward culture. I'm gonna just stop there and get to the presentation.

CAITLIN: All right. Let's do it.

CHERYL: So, the presentation. We're gonna start with an overview of the relationship of feminist activism, capitalist exploitation, race, and disability. And then we'll have some time for small group discussions looking at the idea of human value and work. And we've got some handouts we're gonna give you to facilitate those small group discussions. We'll come back and talk as a large group about what you talked about as a small group. And then we'll leave you with a call to action. We're going to cover a ton today. This is really like an introduction to some concepts. So don't feel like you're gonna walk away like I got it. Now I know how to cripp capitalism.

CAITLIN: Yeah.

CHERYL: We're gonna cover a lot. And you might walk away feeling like why did they cover 7,000 things at once? Well, I don't really know why, but it is--

CAITLIN: Cuz it's important. That's why.

CHERYL: It's important, and it is this intricate. This is the thing, is that people don't often, non-disabled people and non-disabled community doesn't often see disability as complex and intertwined with anything. And so that's kind of the heart of what we're talking about today is that complexity and intertwinedness. The presentation. OK. So we really wanted to present at a gender studies symposium because we feel that there is a lot of crossover between disability justice activism and feminist activism. But we also feel that crossover's not being tapped quite enough. So that's why we're super honored and excited to be here at this event. So we want start looking at this crossover.

### **Disability justifies discrimination**

CHERYL: OK. So women, as you may have had heard, have historically been excluded from the public sphere, completely or partially excluded and in terms of, for example having a career, working a job, civic engagement like the right to vote. And a lot of that argument is based around this supposed cognitive or emotional inferiority of women compared to men. And I am aware that I'm using this gender binary, women and men. And I'm saying that on purpose cuz that is historically where it's coming from. There's also this supposed physical limitations or just this general fragile nature that women have that men supposedly don't have. Now, a lot of feminist arguments revolve around saying no, women are not inferior to men in these ways. It's a good argument. No, PMS is not gonna make us more likely to hit that red button and start WWII. I mean, I've heard people say these things.

But here's the deal, these are attributes of disability. These things around fragility and inferiority, they're attributes of disability being ascribed to non-disabled people, just women in general. The larger US culture sees disability as being defined by cognitive, sensory, physical, or emotional limitations, but that is not the only way to define disability. Just like you wouldn't say women are shorter than men in general, and there, now I've defined women. You wouldn't do that, and yet that's how disability is defined by these just perceived limitations. I also want to point out too that Black and Minority Ethnicity populations are disproportionately given disability diagnoses, and we're talking all the way back to pre-school. And that doesn't mean disability is more prevalent in these communities, but it is constructed as more prevalent. And then white people use this as some supposed evidence of racial inferiority and always have in this country. So coming back to feminism: Feminism might argue that women are equal to or superior to men. I mean, there are lots of different ways to define the relationship. That's two of the fairly mainstream ways to define it. Here's the deal: If you only reject the notion that women are inferior to men, there is a serious problem. Because you also need to say, "Hey, if someone does have a limitation--perceived for real--should we automatically say they are inferior human beings?" No and hell no. You shouldn't. Now, disability, perceived or real, should not be the basis of saying that someone is an inferior person, yet we do it all the time in the U.S.

CAITLIN: Also, often in subtle ways that people don't recognize. You know, I'm sure people here have heard the term "microaggressions," where it's like the little things. But ableism and when we're talking about ableism, we're talking about discrimination against disabled people. I mean it's a complex concept that includes so many things, but it's systemic.

CHERYL: And institutionalized.

CAITLIN: And institutionalized. And ableism intersects with every other oppression you can think of, and it has been used to promote other -isms. It's been used to promote sexism. It's been used to promote racism. So that, if you walk away from anything from this workshop, you should know that the bottom line is ableism is a part of all these oppression. It all intersects.

CHERYL: We could wrap up there. That's good.

CAITLIN: Yeah, I know.

BOTH: [laugh]

CAITLIN: OK. So in terms of that intersection and the way ableism, like Caitlin was saying, is used to sort of bolster these other oppressions and -isms, we go back to you know, women supposedly had these essential, biological limitations. And that was the justification used to keep women out of civic engagement and work, historically. So what we have to be, we have to be careful when, as women or feminists or anyone in this room, anyone anywhere, we have to be careful that when we argue women are not inferior to men and then we don't challenge the inferiority argument itself, then we're still promoting that it's OK to discriminate against inferior people. I'm just not one of them as a woman. So we've got to reject the rhetoric of calling certain kinds of people inferior to other kinds of people in general. So yes. I'm going to describe the images that are up on the slides in this presentation for audience members who might be here or who are gonna watch this video who are not be taking in the information visually. Well, and actually the camera's not even showing those slides. So there you go.

CAITLIN: Oh. [chuckles]

### **Women's suffrage is not a call for suffrage for all**

CHERYL: So here, in this image, we have an argument that women's suffrage is not a call for suffrage for everyone. So there's a sketched women's suffrage poster. And the top row says "What a Woman may be, and yet not have the Vote." We've got drawings of women in work roles and the titles mayor, nurse, mother, doctor or teacher, factory hand. And then the bottom row says "What a Man may have been, & yet not lose the Vote." And there are drawings of men and the titles convict, lunatic, proprietor of white slaves, unfit for service, and drunkard." OK. So you see [laughs] you see the posturing of women, in any role at all, as better than white slave owners, OK, but still better than disabled people. Now, in this image, I like that the mother, who's doing, as we know, constant unpaid work, is positioned next to women who hold different levels of education and different types of careers. OK, that's nice. But what I don't like is the binary that they've drawn. I mean, it's color coded to be two separate, distinct categories. And then you've got disabled people positioned on the same line with slave owners. Get them away from the women. They're not like--Mm. Anyway.

CAITLIN: The lunatic.

CHERYL: Yeah, the lunatic. Which, you know, that's language of the time of this poster. Well, people still say "lunatic," but they say it as an insult now, which is a microaggression and part of ableism.

CAITLIN: Right.

### **What does it mean to say, "I am not like them?"**

CHERYL: So what is the cultural situation that we're creating and perpetuating when women say, "I'm not like them!?" Here's a poster that's called "American Women and Her Political Peers." It's copyright 1911 by Henrietta Briggs-Wall. And the text says: "In many states women are classed, politically, with idiots, convicts, the insane, and Indians—not allowed to vote. Women do not, however, escape taxation. "Taxation without representation is tyranny." "Resistance to tyranny is obedience to God."" And again, these words--idiots and convicts--these are the words of the time these posters were made.

CAITLIN: And I think this also is a good representation, too, of just how it intersects with the racism of that time as well. It's pretty representative.

CHERYL: It really is, yeah. So the image here, we have a white, middle-class woman in the middle. And she's surrounded by an intellectually disabled man, a man in prison garb, a homeless man, and a Native American man in a headdress. So my question, when I look at this poster and cringe and feel nauseated, my question is: Are we helping, are feminists helping to create an equitable society if we distance ourselves, as women, from ethnic minorities, from people in poverty, and from disabled people? How is that working toward equity? It's not. [chuckles]

### "Defectives" side by side

CHERYL: So moving on from suffrage, we look at the crossover of race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexuality, and disability in how all of these factors are used to define, quite categorically, who is a "defective" human in U.S. culture. And I keep talking about the U.S. It's not like this stuff is specific just to the U.S. But I wanna stick just with the U.S. cuz that's all I can say I really know about and have looked out. There are other economic systems that create and perpetuate disabling situations in different ways than U.S. capitalism. But we're pretty hooked on talking about capitalism today. So the freak shows and the circus side shows, which these pictures are from, they are an absolute model of dehumanization. And this was the entertainment industry of the 1800s. It was really on the rise then. And this was actually the only place where disabled people could have a job and earn money. This was it: showing off as a freak was the only paid work that you could get. And there were a lotta disabled people who felt empowered by that cuz they had some measure of control. Whereas, outside of this, they had no control and no earning power. So kind of twisted.

The images here of classic freak show subjects. There's a white, female pre-teen with long hair who stands on her hands and feet, looking at the camera in a sepia print. Her wrists are bent flat. And her knees fully bend backward, allowing her to hold this stance with a flat back on her feet instead of on her knees. Then there's a portrait of someone. I'm gonna say his name, and I don't like saying this name. But I'm gonna say the name of this character. This is "Zip the Pinhead." He's an African-American man with a proportionately sized face and ears and a tiny head. And then we have a stylized drawing of five people. There's four upper class white people: two men and two women. In the middle is an African woman wearing beads and no clothing. Her rear end is exaggeratedly enormous, and she stands behind a rope, reaching out near one woman. That white woman looks away and is fainting and, thank goodness, is about to be caught by her man. And the other white woman looks away while her man looks toward the crowd and points at the African woman.

Anybody here familiar with the Hottentot Venus? Yeah, OK good. A lot of yeses, good. People were importing African women of a certain ethnicity because they tended to have genitalia that looked different than most people's of European descent. That was the sole purpose for importing them as freaks. They were imported as objects curiosity and disgust. Don't miss that second part; people were looking out of disgust. And this was because of their bodies, no other reason. Now, even today, with the freak shows gone. Well, "American Horror Story." The freak shows are essentially gone, but some people are still marked in various ways, and the public loves to stare and gawk. Even to this day. And this is the root of why so many disabled people get asked by complete strangers "What happened to you? What's wrong with you, Caitlin? Why are you in that chair?" This is every day. Caitlin gets that crap every day. A lotta disabled people get those questions on a regular basis. And this is objectification. This is not curiosity. This is, "Oh! I just wanna know!" No, you don't. This is objectification, and it's what

made freak shows so popular in the first place. And you can see, it's not just disability. We're looking at this intersection across nationalities, genders, ethnicities.

CAITLIN: And strangely enough, though, has anyone seen [the movie "Freaks?"](#)

CHERYL: Oh yeah.

CAITLIN: Tod Browning. That's actually one of my favorite movies. When you watch it now--I watched it recently, and I was actually pretty blown away by how radical it is. Like the freaks in the movie are family, they do not want to become non-disabled. They have their chant, "One of us, one of us." I love that movie.

CHERYL: Yeah.

CAITLIN: I was thinking you would not see a movie like that now.

CHERYL: Unless we made it.

CAITLIN: Unless we made it, yeah. Like the disability representation is so different now, and it was really radical. And also the history of the making of that movie is pretty fascinating. And I did watch some of "American Horror Story," but then I stopped. I don't know how good it actually was.

CHERYL: [giggles] Yeah. You can get "Freaks" for free on YouTube. When you look it up, it's a black and white film. So you'll know you've hit it. It's from the '40s, '30s?

CAITLIN: No, I think it's like 1920-something, or '30s, yeah.

CHERYL: It's old. It's old. Well worth watching.

### **Capitalism designs immigration law**

CHERYL: So you've got, OK, we've got our freak shows, and at the same time as this going on, you've got immigration laws getting stricter. Of course, I don't think they were applying strict laws if a circus was importing someone as a freak. But for anyone else who was trying to come in on their own, not being imported as a freak, this is what they're up against. Capitalism is what is dictating the immigration officers to exclude anyone who appears unfit to work. That's it. "I don't think you can work. Or we wouldn't wanna hire you. So you can't come into our country." Just straight up. The Act of 1882 prohibited the entry of any "lunatic, idiot, or any person unable to take care of himself or herself without becoming a public charge." And in 1917, they added the exclusion of any "persons with abnormal sex instincts." Now, nowadays we know what that means, what that language is referring to. That is the pathologizing of homosexuality, calling it a mental disease. Your abnormal sexual instincts are a disability. And hopefully folks are aware, in case you aren't aware, that homosexuality was a mental disease in this country until the 1970s. It was classifiable as a disease. Look at the pathologization. I just call that a disability because I don't like it. OK. Not me, society!

[CAITLIN, AUDIENCE laugh]

CHERYL: Aw! Pronouns got in the way. OK. I was being an immigration officer there for a moment. OK. Now, the officers were instructed to exclude anyone, not who had a disability, but who they suspected had a disability. It was up to them to decide! So if they suspected you might be feeble-minded or have some kind of mental disease or a less than superior physique, maybe you were a short man. That was it.

They could exclude you. And just one example. OK, feeble-minded. OK. that's someone who's slow, can't follow instructions. All right, how many immigrants on their first day in the U.S. knew English and could follow instructions? So right off the bat: Oh, you can't understand me? You're feeble-minded. Ooh, so that's just one example of how this whole idea of whatever you perceive to be a disability, you can exclude these potential immigrants. So you see the ascription of disability attributes--whether real or in this case, very often made up--being used to justify exclusion.

CAITLIN: And this still happens today with immigration.

CHERYL: Yeah. Oh, it does, it does. And there was a lotta stuff going on in the news in Australia recently.

CAITLIN: Yeah, Australia, in particular, has very strict, ableist laws about immigrating there. Yeah.

CHERYL: Can't come in cuz we might have to take care of you. And just the notion that you see a certain body and say, "Well, that person will need help." That's actually not correct. You don't know that. And even if you do, mm. OK, well, this is what we're here to talk about, so. OH, it looked prettier on my computer, but then it just sort of is on that line. Well, anyway. My question is: How far have we come since suffrage, since the freak shows, and since these early immigration laws? Have we left those historical roots? A question which Caitlin conveniently just answered, and she said, No!" And I would also argue that we're still very insistent on seeking normalcy and "normal" people when it comes to deciding who gets to work and how we value people with jobs. So, often when we hear about employment and unemployment rates in the news, we don't hear about the disability community in specific, and the picture of employment and unemployment there is very, very different from the non-disability community, or you know, larger society. So just real quick. This is gonna be the only slide of stats. I can barely even talk through it cuz stats, blah, boring. That wasn't planned. I'm gonna stick to the script.

CAITLIN: [giggles]

## **Disability and employment**

CHERYL: OK, so looking at some data real quick. In 2012, disabled people ages 21-64, 20% received Supplementary Security Income. Those are government benefits. I'll talk about them more in a minute.

28% of disabled people lived below poverty line. Fyi, if you're on SSI, you are below the poverty line. So then there's another 8% not receiving benefits and below the poverty line.

CAITLIN: Yeah, if you get SSI, it's like I don't know the monthly check. It's \$700-something. I mean, and it gets reduced if you work.

CHERYL: I have a whole slide on that.

CAITLIN: OK, I'm sorry. I'm jumping ahead, but just in case you don't know what SSI is.

CHERYL: [chuckles] That's OK.

CAITLIN: It's very, very little money that you're supposed to live on.

CHERYL: Very little, yes. It's like allowance. So looking at these numbers from 2012, in terms of the poverty line, 15% of the non-disabled community was below the poverty line, but 28 of the disabled community. That's bad.

Only 20% of disabled people were employed full-time for the full year.

Imagine if 80% of non-disabled people were unemployed. We would notice. Nobody seems to notice that 80% of disabled people are not employed full-time for a full year.

Looking really quickly at some numbers from 2014. The non-disabled community: 6.8%. That was the unemployment rate. That was the kinda stuff you'd hear on the news. 13.3% for disabled people ages 16-64.

More than double. But you don't hear about that. You don't hear about that on the news.

The other troubling thing is, in terms of statistics, is they often leave out people who live in institutions. And maybe you've heard oh, institutions were closed! No, they weren't. News flash. Some of them have been. They are not all closed, and we find innovative and creative ways to maintain other kinds of institutionalization. And there's a lot of people, typical working age, who are institutionalized. One example I put here, over 56,000 people just with intellectual disability or developmental disability are institutionalized. Just that one category. If you were to count people with mental illness, traumatic brain injury, severe physical disabilities, it's off the charts. And incarceration is another form of institutionalization. And I'm telling you, if you took out every person from the jails and the prisons who has a learning disability, a traumatic brain injury, or mental illness, they'd be near-about empty. So this is one of the ways that we keep institutions going. And those are people who are not working, or what are they? They're doing like road work and construction for 5 cents an hour.

So, being institutionalized means you're deliberately separated out from larger society. You are invisibilized because capitalism has decided you can't be included. You're too different from the "normal" people.

CAITLIN: And because it's really profitable to warehouse people in institutions.

CHERYL: Oh yes. Absolutely. And I'm glad you said "warehouse," cuz that's actually a more accurate word. Yeah.

Oops. I turned my page. I got lost.

Women used feminist activism to fight for the right to not have to stay at home some decades ago, but the disability community in many ways is still being stuck there. And it's not even necessarily just the home; it's these institutions and warehouses.

CAITLIN: Right. Some people are just trying to get home.

CHERYL: Yeah.

CAITLIN: But they're being forced into institutions.

CHERYL: Yeah.

So we don't have those numbers of how many working-age people in institutions are not working. Like that would really inflate the numbers a lot. Not inflate artificially.

## Should inclusion require assimilation?

CHERYL: So we ask this question, if normal is what everyone has to be. Well, if you're not normal, then you would have to assimilate to become normal. So should inclusion actually require assimilation?

Women, sometimes encouraged to act more like men. So, embody the behavior of the people in power. And that way you can achieve power or status. And I just, I could not bear to write this on the slides, but is anyone familiar with leaning in?

AUDIENCE: [laughs]

CHERYL: OK. Boy, I love the response. Thank you. I couldn't, like I had my eyes closed. That's what I'm talking about here. That's assimilation. And we could have a whole workshop on some of the problematic blaming that goes on in the leaning in. OK.

CAITLIN: And I think also, just quickly, when you're talking about encouraging to act more like men, it is in terms of this corporate structure. Like, you need to climb the corporate ladder. And then, once you're the CEO, then you're successful. And that is the goal of the kind of lean in style of feminism. And interestingly enough, though, Sheryl Sandberg, who is the lean in person, was asked to meet with a group of mainly Latina maids at a hotel where she was speaking cuz they were trying to unionize. And she refused to meet with them. So she wasn't quite leaning in there, I guess. Anyway, that was an aside. I'm sorry.

CHERYL: That was a good aside, though. Yeah.

Because now I'm just giving one tiny example of assimilation in Black, Brown, and immigrant communities. And that is the demand to speak English. "You're in this country now. Speak English." But you get that with people who are also from this country. Now, this demand to speak English just because you're in this country, which the U.S. was founded by immigrants as a country. So I don't get that. But when people say you need to learn to speak English, they're talking about what is unfortunately called "Standard English," which is what I'm speaking: white, middle class English. So any other dialect or any other use of English is automatically devalued as that's not English enough. And so you've got this demand for assimilation and all these Black and Brown communities of people who are from here and people who are not from here, alike.

But disabled people are also demanded to assimilate. And this next sentence, this is, I don't know the history or the types of people in this room. So I don't know if anyone here will get defensive. A lotta people I know would get very, very defensive in this next sentence. So just be aware. Ouch. And let's just keep moving on, and we can talk about it later if you got defensive. In terms of assimilation for disabled people, it is often framed as rehabilitation, healing, medicine-

CAITLIN: Curing.

CHERYL: That was the next word.

CAITLIN: Sorry. I keep doing that.

CHERYL: No, that's good. Medicine and curing. OK? They sound positive to a lotta people. And some defensive: Oh, that's good, right? Don't get us wrong: it is sometimes a form of assimilation to practice curing and healing and medicine. We are demanded to get rehab to "cure" or overcome our issues, like we're the only people with issues. Or we're trained--as was the case in my rehab--trained to at least act



and communicate in “standard,” accepted ways. We're not gonna change the standards, like the whole lean in thing. No, we're not gonna change the standards. You have to come over and do it this way. This is what is demanded of disabled people. If you've heard of the Americans with Disabilities Act, that calls for accommodations and access, but--you may or may not know--it's an unenforceable law. There's no enforce--You can't call your local ADA Enforcement Officer. They don't exist. There is no mechanism to enforce the ADA. I can ask you put in a ramp; you don't have to. And this law and the many--I mean, it has led to many extremely positive changes. Don't get me wrong. But those changes don't actually guarantee inclusion or equity. Yeah, you can get in this building, but then what? And the other thing about laws like the ADA, is that they maintain the position of disabled people as inferior, and you guys need to fight for your right to access. We're not just going to universally provide it. You need to fight. Go ahead and sue us. Then we'll put in a ramp. Although I have to say, this building, it's very accessible. It's got some nice features. Another thing that may be of interest, I think, to feminists, is the topic around re-. Just words, just not coming out.

Take two.

Also there's reproductive health access. And it is denied to many disabled people. So what will happen is some providers may deem them incapable of decision-making with no good reason, no evidence behind it whatsoever. Or deeming people incapable of providing adequate childcare. I'm just thinking about that Sheryl Sandberg, is that her name?

CAITLIN: Mmhmm.

CHERYL: Well, when she's off doing these lectures and presentations and TED talks, she's not at home caring for her kids. Someone else is caring for her kids. Yet we wouldn't call her incapable of providing adequate childcare. But a disabled: Oh, wheelchair! Oh, deaf! Oh...incapable. Plenty of people don't care for their children hands on but aren't called incapable the way disabled people are automatically called incapable.

And then also, non-disabled society doesn't really want us to pass on any defective genes, even in the case of disabilities that are not genetic. Some people don't want disabled people to reproduce and pass them on.

CAITLIN: And also, non-disabled society strips sexuality away from disabled people. So a lot of especially disabled women, when they go to the doctor, aren't even asked about their sex lives, if they're on birth control. They're not given that education. People with intellectual disabilities and developmental disabilities are not given sex education. There's huge rates of assault against disabled women, and disabled women experience sexual assault at a much higher rate than non-disabled women, which is a huge feminist topic that often goes ignored. Which is one reason why we're here to talk about the overlapping. But disabled women are hugely marginalized within feminism. Period.

CHERYL: Period.

And we're not gonna assimilate. OK.

CAITLIN: And we're not.

## Work if you assimilate

CHERYL: So, the next, now we're moving into work. And what does work look like in the disability community, specifically for disabled women? Not that page. Good thing I numbered these pages. OK. So there is work if you will assimilate. So the argument made is, "See? I'm normal too! Let me into the club! Let me work!"

So here's a screen shot of the NPR.org Special Series--"Special Series?"-- called "my big break!" I just picture that that's how they type it. The title of the article is "Desperate to Speak: How Emily Blunt Found Her Voice." Emily Blunt is a white woman, and in the picture, she stands by a wall with floral wallpaper and stares, emotionless at the camera, wearing a white, fitted dress.

AUDIENCE: [laughs]

CHERYL: She's just so emotionless. All right.

From the article: "On screen, Blunt is a natural. So you'd never guess that, as a kid, she could hardly say her own name — she grew up with a severe stutter. She says her parents tried everything, from relaxation therapy to listening to audio recordings of dolphins or the soothing voice of a woman on a cassette tape."

I didn't have to do it in that voice, but I just had to. OK.

So the implication here is that a severe stutterer could not be a natural-born performer. I don't know about you guys, it doesn't make any sense to me. That just makes no sense. How could that be true? Now, NPR is very, very thrilled that she no longer stutters. They're happy. They say that only now she's found her voice. In other words, her voice is now acceptable in U.S. society, so now we say she has one. But here's the deal: She always had one. It's just that she was just told that it wasn't a good one because she had a severe stutter.

So now she has her voice. Now she's allowed to claim a voice. But I would argue that

CAITLIN: She always had one.

CHERYL: she always had one, yeah. OK.

CAITLIN: And just to plug Criptiques really quick, there's a really great essay in there from a stuttering comedian.

CHERYL: Oh, yes! Nina G.

CAITLIN: Yeah, Nina G. So like clearly, you can be successful and have a stutter and not be ashamed of it and write things and perform.

CHERYL: Right, yes. So my question is this "I'm normal too! Let me in," does this remind you of the work that feminists do to encourage body positivity, or redefine beauty standards, or challenge the power of the male gaze? You know, like, "I'm beautiful too even if I don't look like that!" It's the same line of argument. Where am I? Speech and communication assimilation--and some people in the room may be unfamiliar with hearing it called that, but speech and communication assimilation is not that different from asking women to act like men or to act the way men want them to act so they can make it big.

"Hey, I stopped stuttering! Now I can be famous?" Why? I woulda listened to your radio show if you stuttered? Why? Why do we have to tell people to stop stuttering so they can get famous?

OK. I'm gonna stick to the script. All right.

## Wanting work

CHERYL: Then there's wanting work and using the argument that disabled people are just as capable as you non-disabled people! Doesn't that sound at all like the women are just as capable as men argument? It's the same argument. And I'm not criticizing the argument. There is a lot of reason behind it. I am saying it doesn't go quite for enough.

This one here--it's kinda hard to see her, but this one here--is from The New York Times online, from the N.Y. / Region section. And the article titled "Drive to Push Past Her Disabilities and Achieve Independence". I mean, I'm mm. OK.

A 28-year old Black woman stands in a doorway of a brick building. She wears a leather jacket and distressed blue jeans. Hands on her hips, she looks directly at the camera without smiling.

And the text from the article about Tashiema Smith. It says, "Ms. Smith has been looking for a job.

She says, "I want my own space. I want to gain that independence."

She still lives with her family.

"Ms. Smith receives \$733 each month in Social Security benefits. 'I don't want to be on disability,' she said. 'I want to better myself.'

The job she is seeking, she said, would be in a day care center. Ms. Smith helped raise her younger siblings.... She would, however, need a special license to be eligible for such a job.

'I don't give up,' Ms. Smith said....'I keep trying to overcome my disability.'"

Now, I guess my question for her would be overcome your disability that you were born with and that is not going to go away? Or overcome the societal barriers and societal attitudes that prevent her from either succeeding in the workforce--like she's gotta go get a special license. Why? She's already worked with kids?--or the barriers that prevent her from having pride even while on government benefits?

We hear women talk about the need to have pride nowadays whether you work a job or not. But for disabled people, it seems like we have to have a job in order to have any pride.

Now, I'm gonna talk about Social Security, sorry, Supplemental Security Income a little bit here, which we already started talking about a little. But it's not very often talked about in non-disability circles. And that is that if you live on SSI, which she does, \$733 a month, you cannot earn money, and you cannot save. So yeah, OK, \$733. We can all agree that's not a lotta money. But did you know you cannot have a savings account? You cannot have assets. And we know that this is the surest way to work to break the cycle of poverty, get out of poverty, is to save. And you can't do that if you're on SSI. So, this is a government benefit for people who are disabled and have been unable to work their whole lives or maybe they've been out of work for too long to cash in on Social Security Disability Insurance, which comes out of your paycheck. It's the little Social Security tab on there. And so it is a sentence to live in poverty.

You have to have a job to have any pride. We're not gonna let you get a job. OK.

## Work; lose benefits

CHERYL: And as Caitlin mentioned before, work a job, lose your benefits. Everybody wants us to be independent. Disabled people will be good people when they have overcome and become independent. OK, but we're gonna penalize you if you become independent. So a lot of respect for disabled people hinges upon being independent. But the benefits are cut immediately if you start earning. So maybe reduced if not cut all together. And if you can't live without your government health insurance--I mean literally live, just the basic thing of being alive, much less being healthy, if you can't live without this insurance, then--you have stay on SSI. Which means you can't get a good job. And so where does this leave disabled women in the feminist arguments that we have around women, go ahead and go to work if you want to and can? What about disabled women?

This is an image from the Career Access website and an article called "The Bureaucracy of Being Disabled." Do you see the, it's interesting. It's a very different title, and that title, I'm sure was written by this disabled person, Alice. Very different feel than the other two titles.

CAITLIN: Mmhmm.

CHERYL: Drive to push past her disabilities! Anyway. My big break!

Lemme get back to this. OK so, Alice Wong wrote this. And the portrait there is of Alice, an East Asian woman in glasses and red blouse covered in blue bows, And she looks up and smiles lightly for the camera.

And the text is, "While I was an undergraduate, I worked less than 10 hours a week so my income did not impact my SSI very much.

This all changed when I moved to California for graduate school....[W]hen I started working as a research assistant part-time, this is when my troubles began.

About a year into graduate school I received a letter from the Social Security Administration saying I was overpaid \$2000 and had to pay it back."

Now, trust me, that \$2000 had already been spent by the time that letter came. How could it not be on \$700 a month? SSI doesn't cover all of someone's medical or disability-related expenses. Like if you have a Personal Care Assistant, it's not like SSI is just paying their wage. It doesn't cover much of anything in your life after rent. So a lot of people don't try to work because of that. And I do wanna point out that not many disabled people have the resources to get through college or grad school like Alice. So she's kind of a rare example. I wanted to put it up because it was such a great article that she wrote here, and I just love Alice. Hi, Alice.

CAITLIN: She does a really awesome project called the [Disability Visibility Project](#), which you can look at online. And what is the story?

CHERYL: It's a partnership with StoryCorps.

CAITLIN: StoryCorps, yeah.

CHERYL: Because there's never been a dedicated storytelling project around disability. So she said, "I'll make one." And so she partnered with StoryCorps San Francisco in building up celebration for the Americans with Disabilities Act 25th anniversary this year. So they're just getting all these disability stories that've never been captured before because disability?

CAITLIN: Who cares?!

CHERYL: Right. Who cares.

CAITLIN: The Disability Visibility Project is awesome.

CHERYL: It's really amazing, yeah.

### **The right to not work**

CHERYL: So. Talked about all these different ways around work, but what about not working and the right not to work? And this is disabled artist Sunny Taylor's response to the non-working guilt that some disabled people feel when they get benefits or when they have family support instead of working. And we could say that Tashiema Smith, the woman who wants to overcome her disability so that she can get off benefits, you might say she has a touch of "non-working guilt." Well, I don't know. Hers was more about independence than guilt.

CAITLIN: I think also, there's such a stigma in receiving benefits. I used to actually work with people who were on benefits who were trying to get back to work, and a lot of it was done over the phone. So I talked to hundreds of people. And constantly, I heard you know the shame. They were ashamed that they were on benefits, and every time I'm like, "You know, you earned this money." Social Security Disability is actually, a lotta people don't understand that you pay into it. It's from your work taxes. And they were still so stigmatized that they were receiving benefits. And even if they were getting SSI, like who cares? You need that money. You deserve that money. It's fine. But there is such a stigma.

CHERYL: Yeah.

CAITLIN: And with the 80% unemployment rate, disabled people, most of them I know, would love to work. But then you're entering into a very ableist workforce. People aren't really clamoring to hire disabled people because they have a lot of preconceived notions about capabilities.

CHERYL: Right. Yeah, and an unwillingness to be accommodating.

CAITLIN: Exactly.

CHERYL: Whoa! What do I do if someone with a disability applies? I don't know. Interview them? Ugh.

So there's the stigma and the shame, which leads to this non-working guilt. Oh, I don't deserve benefits. I shouldn't have them.

And Sunny Taylor says, "Forget all that."

It is within a capitalist system that we've decided to call paid work "productive" and unpaid work simply "unproductive." That's not like, I don't know. There's no scientific evidence that one is productive and one's not. Heck, we can all think of lots of arguments of paid work that's unproductive. [giggles]

CAITLIN: There's lots of different kinds of work.

CHERYL: Absolutely. And the work that oh in this, in Alice Wong's slide, I mean it's a much longer essay. But I just cut out these few lines. But there is a tremendous amount of work that goes into cataloguing all these parts of your life and going through the bureaucracy and submitting the paperwork and waiting for the answers. It's a lot of work to do that.

So if paid work is productive, and unpaid work is unproductive, this translates to paid workers are valuable people, and non-paid workers are not valuable people. But that's going to include most disabled people. So there we are. Disabled people are just unproductive, non-valuable people.

And so again, think about the feminist activists here and the way that women who have a paid job and kids, we call them "working moms" and women who don't have paid jobs are "stay at home moms." But I think that they're working, raising children, housekeeping. There's probably a ton of other things people are doing besides the nonstop work of raising kids. No matter what kind of child-rearing you do, it's work. And housekeeping is work. And the bills and all that stuff. So it's not just around disability. Unpaid work is devalued across the board. Working moms, stay at home moms.

So this idea that disabled people are inferior to non-disabled people is a social construction. This is what we've been getting at the whole time. There is no evidence. There is absolutely no evidence that suggests that people with impairments are less valuable as humans. And we actually do contribute to and enrich societies. All disabled people. All people.

We seem to just operate in this capitalist society as if we have the evidence that disabled people are inferior. Yet, you don't actually have that evidence. It's not there.

And this is just like the idea that women are inferior or Black and Brown people are inferior. They are social constructions of who gets to be called valuable and valued under capitalism. And I think it's just that a lot of people who are open to different gender and ethnic equality still can sometimes have a really hard time accepting that disability doesn't equal inferior. I think that's a hard notion for some people to get.

Sunny Taylor asks why is the "right" and opportunity to perform wage labor considered the ultimate freedom? Aw, I gotta go to work. Uh, put on my. This is why shows like, what was that movie, "Office Space?" That movie's true. There is nothing made up in that movie. Not everybody's situation is like that, but come on. This is a right? To go to work?

And Sunny would argue that you can reject this "right," and you can choose a sense of liberation in not working because, honestly, a lotta disabled people may be inefficient workers, which is like the bane of capitalism. No, you must be efficient! Some people are just gonna be inefficient because of their impairments. But more importantly, many jobs are not accommodated. And Caitlin was talking about this. Very few employers see the disability community as having a viable workforce or any important valuable people in the community at all.

So part of creating a culture of pride is to reject the dominant culture's attempts to tell you that you are inferior. That's a good job. That's good work to do. And even though disability is usually described as being about the limitations and the challenges someone has, many of us reject the notion that we're inferior or invaluable. Boy, I feel very repetitive. Anyway. In general--this building's really great, but in general--we live in an inaccessible world, a world not built to accommodate people with impairments.

And getting by in that inaccessible world takes a lot of adaptability and a lot of ingenuity. And isn't that what capitalism likes? So.

We have some pretty great inventors in the disability community, out of sheer need. And we also don't feel that having a limitation or a challenge justifies removing someone's rights or our responsibilities to society and to the community. And we don't feel that these things justify lowering our status as a full human or as a citizen. And honestly, in terms of disability, we're still arguing to larger society that we're fully human, whether we draw a paycheck or not.

So that concludes the presentation portion.

## Group Discussions

CHERYL: And we're going to have chatty time now. Chatty time? I tell you. It is just always bad when I don't just read it straight off the page.

CAITLIN: [laughs]

CHERYL: And people are like, "You shouldn't use notes. You'll be more natural." I'm like, "On what topic? It's just whatever topic." OK. Group discussion time. It's not stand-up comedy time.

I'm going to pass out some timelines to you. They're not complete. You're gonna look at them and say, "Hey, how come they left off such and such?" They're just not complete, but they're sort of highlights. We've got 12 point font, and then we've got some in larger print if you need. And we'll ask you to break yourselves up sort of into three groups. Maybe you can do that geographically or number wise. Three groups.

And I'm going to post three quotations on the screen, and I'll have those. And then each group, you'll take a quotation and a timeline. And this is what we want you to do. We want you to examine each quotation as if were written about women, or what if it were written about people of color, or gender and sexual identity minorities, what if it was written about people with disabilities? What about a mixture? Mix it up. See what happens.

Does the intent or the message of the quotation change if you change the population?

What assumptions come up for you when you change the population?

Can you find the ableism, racism, sexism, classism, and other forms oppression in each statement?

How does the language of disability connote inferiority?

How can you respond to these quotations--they're from a long time ago, but how could you respond to them--in an inclusive, equitable way?

These are the quotations. We'll pass them out.

One group will have a line by Frederick Douglass, who was an African-American who escaped from slavery. He was a leader of abolitionist movement, an orator, and an antislavery writer.

And he said, in relation to African-American people, "The true basis of rights was the capacity of individuals."

Then the next quote is Rebecca Sandford, a young bride and suffragist. That's how I found her described. I couldn't find her ethnicity online. She was probably white, but she was definitely a young bride and suffragist.

AUDIENCE: [laughs]

And what she said was, "Our intellect is as capable as man's to assume, and at once to hold, these rights."

And then Matilda Gage, a Native American activist, abolitionist, and suffragist who said, "Obedience to outside authority to which woman has everywhere been trained, has not only dwarfed her capacity, but made her a retarding force in civilization."

Those are the quotations. I'm gonna hand them out to you.

We were gonna come back as a larger group and discussed what you discussed, but we're short on time. And so we're going to skip that.

### **Take-home messages and call to action**

CAITLIN: OK, so there was a lot of info covered today, clearly. But we do have some take-home messages and questions.

So how can feminism embrace the disability community and not distance women from disabled people as a way to prove women's value? Disabled people aren't granted opportunities for financial independence feminism works toward-- Wait, I'm sorry.

CHERYL: That feminism works toward.

CAITLIN: That feminism works towards for women. Sorry. I'm very tired this morning.

Most disabled people who want to work are not hired, they're not accommodated, they work sub-minimum wages, they're shut out of opportunities in education or training, or can't work because of losing benefits and health insurance. That's huge.

Disabled people who don't work aren't valueless because they don't earn a wage. Benefit recipients should not be shamed.

And we have a call to action, so things that you can actually put into practice.

One is: Learn about oppression in communities you aren't in. Share what you learn.

Recognize the social construction of disability mirrors that of gender. Question essentialism and universality.

Ensure feminist events are accessible--physical, emotional, sensory, transportation, and cost. I think when people talk about access, a lot of times they limit it just to physical access, and they're not thinking am I actually gonna be comfortable here? Like, I can get into a building but not necessarily be welcomed. And of course cost and transportation are huge, so.

Question capitalist notions that define which humans are valuable.



Boycott Goodwill because they start non-disabled employees at minimum wage or higher and pay disabled workers below minimum wage with federal protection to do so. Some earn as low as 22 cents an hour. You can Google that. It's true.

CAITLIN: It's true. And there's a little thing on your timelines. Now I can't remember the date. Oh, it's right here. Yes, 1938. Section 14(c) of the Fair Labor Standards Act. The FAIR Labor Standards Act. This is what allows businesses to get permits to pay disabled workers below federal minimum wage. It's still in practice today from 1938. It is, this is, you don't have to Snopes it. This is real, and I think FRONTLINE did a special about it. And I think our regional manager earns in the \$300,000 a year range, but disabled workers cannot start at minimum wage. And it's not uncommon to be around \$1 an hour. So please don't donate to them or shop from them.

If anybody wants this PowerPoint, I'll give you a pdf afterward, and you can take a look at these. But these two websites that you can check out: disabledfeminists.com. It's not updated any longer, but it's got lots of blog posts and great stuff. And DidIStutter.org, the Did I Stutter Project. This post in particular from February 19th by Erin Schick is on stuttering and sexism. And so I talked about speech and communication assimilation earlier. And this is a great post that talks about this overlap of the ways that ableism and sexism are very intertwined and feeding each other in nasty ways.

So, our references.

CAITLIN: Oh, OK. So here's a quote from bell hooks. "Feminism is not simply a struggle to end male chauvinism or a movement to ensure that women have equal rights with men; It is a commitment to eradicating the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels: sex, race, class to name a few--and a commitment to reorganizing U.S. society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires."

Thanks. And if anyone wants books, shirts, stickers, or buttons, they're here. Come talk to me. Go to [Criptiques.com](http://Criptiques.com). Go to [WhoAmIToStopIt.com](http://WhoAmIToStopIt.com).