

Disability Visibility Podcast

Episode 5 “Orphan Black,” Reproductive Justice, and Disabled Women

Guests: Rebecca Cokley and Maelee Johnson

Host: Alice Wong

Transcript by [Cheryl Green](#)

For more information: <https://disabilityvisibilityproject.com/podcast/>

Introduction

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ALICE WONG: Heyyyyy! My name is Alice Wong and I'm host of the disability visibility podcast, conversations on disability politics, culture, and media. One of my favorite TV shows is Orphan Black on BBC America. This show starts off as a mystery when the main character Sarah, played by Tatiana Maslany, discovers she's actually a clone and there are hundreds of people in the world who look like her. There's a lot in this show that clicked with me as a disabled person as Sarah and her sister clones, also known as sestras, fight for control over their bodies and their right to exist. When Orphan Black ended its fifth and final season in August 2017, I had a chance to talk to two friends of mine who are also diehard fans of the show, Rebecca Cokley and Maelee Johnson. We discuss the power of disabled women, eugenics, body autonomy, and disability representation in Orphan Black. Please note in addition to these larger themes, we'll mention characters and plot points throughout all the seasons and what happened in the finale so be warned for spoilers.

Are you ready? Away we go!

LATEEF MCLEOD: This is the Disability Visibility Podcast with your host, Alice Wong.

[electronic blips and countdown, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1]

ALICE: Thank you, Becca and Maelee, some of my most favorite sestras in the world, for joining me on a conversation about Orphan Black and disability.

REBECCA COKLEY: Hi, my name is Rebecca Cokley. I am super nerdy. I'm a mom of two hopeful nerds. And I'm thrilled to be here because I think finding sci-fi fantasy shows and media that are specifically female-centered are few and far between. And I'm a huge Orphan Black addict!

ALICE: Yep, so am I.

MAELEEE JOHNSON: Hi, I'm Maelee Johnson. But Alice and Rebecca are two of my favorite big sestras. I just respect you two and look up to you both so much.

How would you explain *Orphan Black*?

ALICE: How would you explain *Orphan Black* to someone who's never seen it before?

REBECCA: I forget what somebody said about it. They're like, "It's a great show about women, and the men take their shirts off a lot." A lot of men in the media said, "It's a really interesting show, but the men are just there for window dressing. The men are just there to move the plot along." And I thought that was genius because I was like, "Yes, that is actually true."

MAELEE: Yeah, like my mom, she was so shocked that they did not bring Cal back for the last season.

REBECCA: Yeah!

MAELEE: And at the same time, I was like, the genius behind people who were so deep into writing independent female characters that they were like, "She don't need him! She don't need him to come back to finish this story."

REBECCA: Yeah!

MAELEE: *Orphan Black* has definitely been one of my favorite shows of the last five years. As someone who is a huge TV nerd specifically, I love seeing the artistry behind writers who are like, "We wrote a five-season story." And you got to the end of chapter five, and that is the end of the story. And that is why we're ending it.

ALICE: Yeah, I totally agree with you, Maelee. Their storytelling didn't fall into the trap that so many well-known shows do, where they just keep milking it and milking it.

REBECCA: They sort of flirted even with it, even with the last episode, with the fact that we know that there are clones all over the world. When you stop, and you think about Tatiana Maslany is holding down how many characters? It also feels very intimate. I think it's impossible to watch the show and not feel like you're part of that family. You're part of that unit.

MAELEE: I remember moments or seasons where the characters were so spread out. You felt like you knew they had to come back together because there's that connection between them all being sort of the same person, at least at their root and core, who they are created to be. That also is reflected in the disability community. The thing I first love about the disability community is something you don't commonly find in the able community, which is the ability to disappear and then come back. You may be back eventually. That connection can't be destroyed just because you're too sick to be around for a little bit. And everyone's still like, "We knew you were coming back. We left your seat right here. It's fine."

Sestrahood

ALICE: And I think it's another concept that's just so beautiful. And that's the term that came out of the show called "sestras" and "sestrahood."

MAELEE: Sestrahood is the bond that you tend to form with the people closest to you in your life. Often for women, those are female or femme bonds, but sometimes they're male or trans. And these people bring out the best out of you, and your sestras, they see the best in you. And they demand the best from you at the same time that they forgive you when you fall short. They're your friends and your family by choice, and they make you better just by being your sestras.

REBECCA: To me, sestrahood really is about having a core group as folks, as Maelee said, that you don't have to explain yourself, because they know. Having a crew of women that understand the importance of nurturing each other, loving each other unconditionally, and

supporting each other, and holding each other accountable in a way that centers you. I don't know about y'all, but I've noticed the patriarchy does not know what to do with women that support each other.

MAELEE: Yeah, I think they're scared, almost, of women and femme people who are that supportive of each other, who aren't having constant battles amongst themselves. They're just like, "I'm just so happy that you're able to be here. I'm just so happy that you're able to do what you're doing."

ALICE: Well, I do also think that was great that they showed masculinity, male characters in a really nurturing way. And I think the men are, they're there to support the setras, but they're not there to save them. And that's a really wonderful, kind of really refreshing way to plot these male characters within a show.

REBECCA: Watching Felix be able to engage with Rachel, and he knows exactly who she is. She knows her for every part of who she is.

MAELEE: And I like that they used Felix for that because people don't understand how, when you grow up feeling like you're a homosexual in a time where it's not acceptable, you develop self-hate. And you understand what hating yourself is. At that point, he understood her like, "I know you don't love yourself. I know you hate yourself. And this, seeing your disability actually on the outside is making you hate yourself more than ever."

Clones' families and relationships

REBECCA: Yeah. One of the things that really struck me as interesting was hearing about the other clones' families. We've had so many conversations in our house about Cosima and Cosima's parents and the fact that Cosima has locs.

They're always specifically vague about the ethnicity of her adoptive parents. Has she been raised culturally biracial? Or is she a white chick with dreadlocks, just unapologetically a white chick from the University of Minnesota with locs, and what does that mean? But that answer is also never given to us.

MAELEE: I'm the type of Black person who when a person has locs, I might have questions. But I feel like I actually treat it the way you treat religion, where I'm like, "Let me see how you handle things in your day to day life. And that's what I'll make my decision based off of."

ALICE: Well, and speaking of parental figures, let's talk about Rachel. Because Rachel's had a really f-ed up upbringing. I mean, her parents created her; they were scientists.

MAELEE: Rachel and Helena are two different expressions or examples of what it is like to be raised in a way that turns you into a sociopath and you still have the potential to become a good or bad sociopath. So Helena's despite being in a much worse situation, they needed her to be a sociopath just as much as Neolution needed Rachel to be a sociopath. But they weren't going about it in a more logical sense. They were like, "This is emotional sense. This is just a belief that's supposed to guide you into sociopathy." Helena was still more easily able to decide to make choices to be a good sociopath. It's a disability like any other disability, that you have to decide how you handle it. But lots of people, no matter the conditions they were raised in, still decide to be good sociopaths who will only tap into that sociopathic part of their personality when it's to defend people they love, like Helena did.

REBECCA: People ran from Rachel. Her dad killed himself versus watch her plan unfold. Whereas, people were always trying to chase Helena, to get to her.

MAELEE: For Rachel, she was supposed to be a capitalist, objective scientist, and that is it. The reason why she felt like I've done everything right was because she was the sociopathic scientist that would do anything.

ALICE: And I thought the relationship between Rachel and Kira during Season 5-- Rachel, she scared the shit out of me.

MAELEE: And speak about it in Season 1, Helena immediately connected to Kira. But then, she got closer and closer to Sarah.

REBECCA: We know that Rachel really wanted to be a mother. I think that's like the first thing she talks about when they talk about Sarah having a child.

ALICE: Yeah, and I did think it was interesting in the last episode, where Sarah's fighting Westmoreland, it was where he calls her a "fertile freak." He really uses that against her even though that's what he's been looking for, and that's what he's been working toward his entire life.

REBECCA: I also thought the Westmoreland scene, that final battle, was really interesting. Patrick and I were talking about Frankenstein and the idea of the monster coming home to the castle, and the final battle between creature and creator. And that that's the only way it really could've ended.

MAELEE: That was their only way to be free. Their freedom was that man's life.

Eugenics, forced treatment, and larger disability community issues

ALICE: So *Orphan Black* also deals with a lot of these bigger issues that really resonate with me as a disabled person in terms of covering these ideas of eugenics, surveillance, forced treatments, clearly bodily autonomy, and reproductive justice. And there's this quest for cure and perfection. What are some ways the show clicked with you as disabled women in terms of all of these kind of huger or larger issues about this idea of "perfection" and this idea of the evolution of humans?

REBECCA: I do remember even as a kid being at Hopkins, which is a teaching hospital, and having the residents come in and poke me every time it seemed like I was in the middle of a book or eating food or going to sleep.

MAELEE: And you know they need their education, but you're like, "Educate yourself somewhere else, loser."

REBECCA: Oh, totally! And I remember as a kid throwing Jell-O at them and my mom being completely horrified. "I just wanna eat. We flew in yesterday." I really related to those moments where they were sick of being experimented on or even having the realization that this was yet another experiment for the good of DYAD. It wasn't about curing them; it was about making money. That, to me, was triggering and refreshing at the same time 'cause how often do you actually see that?

ALICE: I mean, it's really blatant in terms of this idea of intellectual property and humans being intellectual property. I think that's very real.

MAELEE: I started thinking more deeply about the Casters and how the way the Casters are used symbolically as how male sex can be used violently, at whole cultures and societies. I thought they really took that to the next level and were like, "What if we just made sex from men the ultimate weapon!? That it's just genocidal." And I just thought that was the ultimate level you could use to express how male sex has affected history and the development of women, of all of any other sexes that have tried to emerge and trans people and pansexual people.

ALICE: In a way, it's all about power and control. And yeah. So any other, I guess, thoughts about disability representation in *Orphan Black*?

MAELEE: I thought the Caster clones represented segregation of disability. They actually represented what if you took a society of disabled people, and you segregated them completely? And mind you, you're still providing them all the resources and things they need to live, to be educated, to function. But they're just completely segregated from the rest of society? Let's just do that. If you noticed, their cure mentality went so awry. The Ledas wanted a cure for the illness that killed them but were also very acceptant of their identity as clones. But they still had, "We need a cure for what's killing us." But the Casters, once they got to the point where it was really killing them, they started getting to the point where, "We'll do anything we have to do to live," because they'd been so segregated from able people, from regular society, that they held no value in their lives.

REBECCA: Well, and it was interesting that their disability manifested much more as a mental health disability, meaning the Casters versus the Ledas. The other instance of disability that I thought was really interesting is the one that we start off with in the beginning of the show, is Beth. As our first couple seasons roll on, and we learn more and more about Beth and her substance abuse and her depression and anxiety.

ALICE: A few seasons ago, when Rachel was disabled, when she was injured, we saw a lot about her recovery and that time period where she used a wheelchair, and she started using a cane. But during that entire time, she maintained a pretty hot and sexual relationship with Ferdinand, her lover/partner. And I thought that was especially nice to see. Because you really don't see that in a lot of shows.

MAELEE: As a BDSM-friendly disabled person, hell yeah! BDSM long-distance relationships are a thing, y'all. You be on the Internet, killing it, OK? What most people don't realize is BDSM relationships are actually much more emotionally involved and intense than vanilla relationships. Because of the level of trust it takes and vulnerability it takes to allow someone to put you in a situation where, for example, in the comic book, Rachel has Ferdinand trapped in a box for an undecided amount of time.

REBECCA: Yeah.

MAELEE: That is a level of trust that you just can't put anyone else in the world in charge of. That is why people are attracted to it. For Rachel and for Ferdinand, their relationship was so intense, that connection is so intense, that you you're like, this is the only other person in the world who I can 100% trust with my life, my pain, with my suffering, with everything. They'll let me express that in this way, and I know they're not gonna hurt me because of it.

It really made me rethink my whole wardrobe and all of my accessibility accessories.

REBECCA: Oh god, yes.

MAELEE: And I'm like, my god. Where am I buying my canes? They're worthless. We need new ones. Where's one with a diamond head that's all white?!

REBECCA: Yeah, I love that she didn't have the, what we lovingly refer to as the stripper cane, the clear, Lucite hospital cane.

MAELEE: Oh my god! She was like, fuck that cane! If it is not pearl white, I don't handle it!

REBECCA: Of course Rachel would have like a scepter. And when she's on the island, and she's in the crappy chair, like the hospital-grade chair, that is actually wheelchair-bound. She is actually bound to this chair because this is a crappy-ass chair.

ALICE: Well, also she was in the basement.

MAELEE: When she's in the basement, and she looks up at the epically steep stairs, that could be just the meme of inaccessibility. And then it should be like, #California [laughs]. Because that's the whole state! They're like, "We're a beautiful, progressive, financially wealthy state that doesn't understand stairs and elevators." I just feel like that should be the meme that goes nationwide.

ALICE: I think a lot about Kira and just she gave up so many of her parts of her body for science. I'll never forget the part where she gave up, didn't they remove part of her tooth? And Cosima was, she felt horrible about asking for that, but she needed that genetic material to keep doing the research. What really scared me in Season 5 was the plans that Rachel and DYAD had to harvest her eggs. That is a huge invasion of a child and any woman, and this happens a lot. I mean, this happens to a lot of people, where things are done to their bodies without their permission at all. And I think that really resonates with a lot of women and also disabled people.

REBECCA: I think women. I think people of color. I think disabled people. I mean, it's very Tuskegee. When I had my daughter, I'll never forget the anesthesiologist. I remember him saying to my OB/GYN over my shoulder, "OK, well, while we're down here, are we gonna just tie her tubes?" Me, giving my OB the side-eye. And my husband's over the other shoulder being like, "Uh, no." And my OB, who's a brilliant Black woman, looking at me and being like, "I don't think that is on the agenda. And I don't think we need to talk about that." The idea of taking advantage of people when they are the most vulnerable, that's a key part of the medical industrial complex. I mean, Henrietta Lacks, you know?

MAELEE: I think that Kira and Charlotte were the only two characters that had a disability experience but weren't 100% cure-seeking. Kira knew that she couldn't fix her connection to all the clones. She simply wanted to understand it.

REBECCA: Yeah, and like when they all think that she's a cutter, I thought that was so fascinating. They were so quick to jump in that there was something wrong with her versus that she was just trying to understand what was happening with her body and her brain.

MAELEE: Exactly. And I think that Charlotte is the same way. Charlotte does have the disability of the genetic defect of their genome, but at the same time, Charlotte doesn't give a fuck about her leg. She doesn't care about her physical, visible disability. She's like, "I'm fine." [laughs] When people bring it up, she's like, "Well, they can bring it up, I guess. But I don't care 'cause I'm fine."

ALICE: I think one of the most crushing moments of the season was when Rachel thought she was "liberated," and she sees in her medical record she is still seen as a number.

REBECCA: Yeah.

ALICE: And she was always gonna be seen that way. She tried so hard to fit in and to be empowered and to have control over her life. She did not want to be a clone at all, but she could never divorce herself from it.

REBECCA: Well, and I thought just the idea of compliance, just how they got compliance out of the different clones. Figuring out the different sorts of leverage that the patriarchy was using to enforce compliance, it's one of those things that I keep thinking about. It's like, the different ways that the medical industrial complex can get disabled people to jump through hoops.

Autonomy, gene editing, and what TV can teach society about science and ethics

ALICE: Human gene editing is definitely on the horizon, as we've seen in the latest news about the testing of an embryo. So that's been a big part of the show *Orphan Black*, the issues of autonomy, and also the consequences of gene editing on our society.

REBECCA: I mean, I was actually really pleased to see them handle it as thoughtfully as they did. And I think because we get to know the characters as women before we get to know them as clones, we're invested in them as characters and not as science plot points. When shows have really solid writing and are really character-centered, it allows people to gain a new perspective on an issue that previously they wouldn't have really paid any mind to.

MAELEE: I completely agree with that. As a Black person, I feel like when you were watching *Family Matters*, *Cosby Show*, *Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, *In Living Color*, did you think that this encompassed the entire Black experience?

REBECCA: Yes!

MAELEE: Did you know moments of this show were set up specifically to educate you on the Black experience? Did you not see those moments? 'Cause we didn't need that! That wasn't for us. That was for you so that you understand.

I think the way *Orphan Black* handles eugenics, what if Caster is used as a disabled form of using disability as eugenics? Or what if eugenics was used as an attack to stop people that we view as disabled, 'cause they're not equal to abled or normal people because they're clones or because they have a disability from birth or whatever? I think that both of those aspects are addressed in the show, yet the show is still entertaining. And I feel the same thing about surveillance or forced treatment and bodily autonomy and bioethics and reproductive justice. Those are all issues that we're actively combatting right now.

So I appreciate that with these characters, they really made them equal. But then they took these people and these fully-developed characters, and they explored our real issue, like forced treatment. Like how they forced the babies onto Helena. And Helena decided, "I wanna have these children," but she also decided, "I'm gonna kill the person who impregnated me with them. You don't get to choose what my body does or doesn't do. And there's still consequences for that." No one ever said she's not gonna be a sociopath anymore, but everyone said, "We're gonna support her and provide her the resources that she's gonna need from the society and from her family in order to succeed as a mother."

ALICE: Yeah, and I think that is another idea that a choice is still a privilege.

REBECCA: Yeah.

ALICE: It's something that people really have to work fucking hard just to have the right to have a choice.

MAELEE: And people will hunt you down to try to take that choice away.

ALICE: Yeah. What I got a lot out of it was number one, science does not exist in a vacuum. There's always gonna be morality. There's always gonna be corruption. There's always gonna be mistakes. But you think a lot about capitalism and about corruption and about the real ability to really take these kind of technologies and really profit from them. And when you profit from them, you really are gonna be exploiting people and also creating greater inequality. So that, to me, was one of the big takeaways: that there's always gonna be these market forces that are always looking to profit from the bodies and lives of the people without power.

REBECCA: Yeah.

MAELEE: I think that I would be remiss, as a medical marijuana patient, to not mention that I really love seeing Cosima smoke Delphine out.

REBECCA: Yes.

MAELEE: There's always a thing you discuss when you're with someone who never smoked. There's a bond that we've never quite made. And I felt like that day was the day when she told her exactly how she needed her to make her connection with her and her sisters period. And also, it was when the show kind of made it so that that was gonna be a part of Cosima's identity no matter what. Because she's gonna need it more and more from there out. It never took away from her intelligence or her productivity. And she's still a genius-ass woman who's kicking ass and making discoveries that are changing their lives.

REBECCA: I think it's also huge that the love story was not Sarah's. In most shows, the love story would be with your main character or with the character that you entered the show with.

MAELEE: The main couple is Colphine.

REBECCA: Yeah.

MAELEE: Colphine, like Cosima and Delphine, it's the relationship that everyone is like, "We're not gonna get through if they don't get through it too, you guys!!"

REBECCA: Yeah!

ALICE: And the show did not fall into the trap of having queer love stories end in a horrific death.

MAELEE: I'm not gonna lie. I was a serious Willow and Tara fan.

REBECCA: [laughs]

MAELEE: RIP, Tara. And that leaves you with a hole in your heart. So I'm very happy to see that I don't have to do that with Colphine, 'cause Colphine forever [laughs]!

ALICE: Yeah.

Your favorite moment of the entire series

ALICE: I wanna ask you both, and this is hard because there's so much; there's five years to choose from. But if you had to pick one scene or moment that you loved of the entire series, what would it be?

MAELEE: I did consider when Donnie and Allison did their money dance. I settle on the clone club dance party.

REBECCA: Yeah.

MAELEE: As someone who has been sick for so long, but I do, to be honest--sometimes I don't give them enough shout-outs, 'cause I'm always praising all of my crip friends and all of my disability fam--but my abled friends who are here for me whenever I need them. Sometimes, when I just need to turn up and dance with them and just let go of everything, I feel like totally Cosima in that. Where you just take off your oxygen mask, and you just go to a dance party. And you know you're gonna be a little out of breath afterwards, but you get to, for a few minutes, just escape necessarily what's happening to your body and embrace all the good people around you and all the good things about your life that are still worth sticking around for despite what's happening to your body.

ALICE: How about you, Becca?

REBECCA: Oh god, there are so many. The Hendrix money dance is definitely up there. Something that really touched me was watching Art walk in with Charlotte on the finale. Yeah, with Charlotte and Maia, and the knowledge that Charlotte's been living with him. It's the intentionality and the power of intentional love. He has taken this child into his home.

ALICE: Yeah, and I think in a way, it's his way of continuing his relationships with all the sestras, but also honoring what he had with Beth.

REBECCA: Yeah. It is active, tangible, intentional choosing family. And I think just seeing all their families together in the backyard, for me, was really touching. We finally have the Hendrix kids home. You got Charlotte, you got Maia, you got the babies. You realize there are no secrets at that point.

ALICE: Yeah. I was really nerve-wracked by the end of the season because I thought they could be very cruel, and they had so many dangers. And yet, they did have a happy ending. And it wasn't done in a cheap way. Every bit of those happy moments were earned. It's such a gift for us as the fans. And I think it was at the end of Season 3, you see all the sestras gather at Allison's house for dinner. That was also a very special moment where, again, it's like a dance party. It's like the finale of the season, where they're just enjoying their time together. They're taking a moment from fighting evil, but they're really sharing their love.

Thank you and wrap-up

ALICE: I really wanna thank you both for sharing your time with me. For people who wanna find you online, how can people reach you or look you up?

REBECCA: You can find me on Twitter @RebeccaCokley. And I'm on Medium. Medium is where I'm doing most of my posting nowadays.

MAELEE: You can find me on Twitter @Mae_DayJ.

ALICE: Well, thank you so much, both of you. You two are definitely, I think, sestras that are very dear to my heart. And I'm very thankful that you guys were able to share this with me.

REBECCA: Aw, thank you, Alice. We love you.

ALICE: I love getting nerdy with my disabled friends, especially about pop culture and media. If you are curious about Orphan Black, you find out more at:
<http://www.bbcamerica.com/shows/orphan-black>

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Thanks for listening and see ya on the Internets!