Disability Visibility Podcast

Episode 66: Cyborgs

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Host: Alice Wong

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For more information: DisabilityVisibilityProject.com/podcast

Introduction

[hip-hop beat with radio static]

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

ALICE WONG: Greetings, cyborgs and humanoids! Welcome to the *Disability Visibility Podcast*, conversations on disability politics, culture, and media. I'm your host, Alice Wong. Today's episode is about cyborgs with Ashley Shew and Jillian Weise. Ashley is an assistant professor at Virginia Tech in the Science, Technology, and Society department, and her current work centers on the idea of technoableism, a critical lens to narratives about technology and disability. Jillian is a poet, performance artist, and disability rights activist. Jillian has written about being a cyborg for *Granta* and the *New York Times*. The three of us share our shared identities as cyborgs and what that means to us. You'll also learn more about tryborgs and technoableism and how they relate to disabled people. Are you ready? [electronic beeping] Away we goooooo!

ELECTRONIC VOICE: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1.

ALICE: OK. So, actually, Ashley and Jillian, thank you so much for being on my podcast today!

ASHLEY SHEW: Oh, thank you so much for having us, Alice.

JILLIAN WEISE: It's a thrill to be here with you.

ALICE: Well, I'm really thrilled too because today's episode about cyborgs, which is a topic very near and dear to my heart, and I thought of you two immediately when I think about cyborgs. And why don't you both introduce yourselves first? Ashley, do you wanna go first and then Jillian?

ASHLEY: Oh, sure. My name is Ashley Shew. I'm assistant professor at Virginia Tech in Science, Technology, and Society. I'm also a hard-of-hearing, chemo-brained amputee with Crohn's disease. So, I've got like disability bingo going on at any moment and winning on all the squares.

JILLIAN: My name is Jillian Weise. I am a cyborg, a poet, a performance artist, and a disability rights activist. I write poetry, and I have a sci-fi novel out. And I'm just so thrilled to be here with you.

ALICE: Thank you!

Defining cyborgs

Let's talk about cyborgs, because just very broadly, I think there are lots of different representations and ideas about what cyborgs are, especially in, let's say, popular culture like *The Terminator*. And, of course, there's, scholarship, there's Donna Haraway's essay called *A Cyborg Manifesto.* So, I guess my first question to both of you is, how would you describe cyborgs to someone who's new to this term? Jillian, do you wanna go first, and then Ashley?

JILLIAN: Sure. Sure. I have a clear moment of when I became a cyborg, though I also don't like to gatekeep the term. So, I'm open to anyone disabled claiming that term. But for me, I became a cyborg in 2010 when I went from a hinge style prosthetic knee to a computerized knee. And so, I would just explain to someone who's not familiar with the idea of a cyborg who is a disabled person, this notion that your body depends on a computer, and your body is a computer.

ASHLEY: So, I don't yet have any computerized parts unless you count my hearing aids, which come off a little bit more easily. So, I think about, when I think about cyborgs, I think about where the term sort of originated. So, I get to work with the Damien Williams, who's excellent and fun. And he's done all of this unearthing around the history of the word "cyborg." So, the coinage, I believe, is during the 1960s or late-1950s with Kline and Clynes. And what they're talking about in terms of cyborgs often involves, in fact, psychotropic medication as part of it. So, cybernetic organisms will also be those enhanced with pharmaceuticals, but also includes other types of what might be called enhancement, but then also might include parts that were not original. So, all of these sorts of things fit into sort of a pretty broad definition of cyborg for me.

I also really like, so, Jillian has introduced the term "tryborg" to describe non-disabled cyborg wannabes. But then I also think about the term "cripborg" that Bethany Stevens talks about, that all cyborgs are cripborgs in the way that she uses it.

ALICE: Yeah, I definitely feel like, just from my body, there's a lot of hardware that's in me. Like I have a metal rod that fuses, I have a spinal fusion. And if people can hear me, my voice sounds a little different because I'm wearing a mask attached to a ventilator. And to me, I don't know if it's about necessarily computers, but definitely electricity is something that my body is completely dependent on it. That there's, you know, I have hardware inside of me. I have hardware attached outside of the me. And if I go a day with a power outage, I am in deep, deep trouble. So, those are some of the ways I think about cyborg bodies is our attachment, our reliance on things outside of our organic meat sac that we're born with.

JILLIAN: Alice Wong, I love the way you're talking about it in terms of electricity or a power outage, because that's sometimes how I will refute someone who's coming out of Haraway's, "We are all cyborgs." The person, a tryborg, usually wants to claim that their phone is integral to their being and their ontology. However, if they didn't have a phone, they could still walk. They could still breathe. And so, for me, that's at the heart of it. [chuckles] I also think that there's something to be said about cultural context. I think another critique I've heard is, well, you're not really a cyborg because you can still exist without your leg. But I'm endangered as a disabled woman, or I feel endangered, if I don't have a leg that works for me. So, I think it's personal and subjective a lot of the time. So, that's how I come to the term "cyborg."

ALICE: Mmhmm. Absolutely. You know, I think about natural disasters all the time because I live in the San Francisco Bay Area. And I do think about like, holy shit, if there was a three-day thing, let's say the big earthquake hits. How would I charge my ventilator, charge my wheelchair? And these are the things that remind me about how fragile our lives are and how dependent we are not just on our physical survival, but just what we need to survive. And I think that's what a lot of people do not understand when they say that disabled people as cyborgs. Because it really is about our life, our bodily functions, our basic functions of living.

[bouncy electronica music break]

The Dawn of the Tryborg

ALICE: Earlier, we talked about I think it was it actually originally in Jillian's article in the *New York Times* called *The Dawn of the Tryborg*. And if you don't mind, Jillian, I guess I just love this essay so much. I just laughed my ass off.

JILLIAN: [laughs] Well, thank you, Alice. I'm delighted that they took a chance on it.

ALICE: For the listeners who are not familiar with this term in your essay, what is a tryborg as opposed to a cyborg?

JILLIAN: A tryborg, in a basic sense, is a faker, a wannabe, a poser, someone who maybe studies cyborg. So, of course, Donna Haraway is a tryborg all the way up to Google's CEO of engineering, Ray Kurzweil, definitely a tryborg. But a tryborg doesn't need to be famous. It could just be the person at the office who has the standing desk and the Google Glass or whatever comes after the Google Glass that is tech savvy, and they're a tryborg. They're experiencing whatever notions of cyborg body first and foremost as metaphor.

ALICE: Yeah, I think tryborgs are like you know, people use tech or whatever they think of as tech mainly as accessories, but it's not central or necessary to my existence. And I think that's what's different from disabled people, many of us, where without these things, we wouldn't be who we are.

JILLIAN: Yes. We wouldn't be who we are, I think, is really an important way of looking at it. The tryborg would still be who they are without the metaphor, but we are constituted by cyborg bodies. Yes, absolutely.

ASHLEY: Yeah, I think tryborgs get to opt out when it's convenient for them in a way that doesn't exist for cyborgs, for cripborgs, disabled cyborgs, however, you wanna couch. That we actually read Jillian's piece in almost all my classes now.

JILLIAN: Oh, wow! [laughs] That's so cool!

ASHLEY: You're being read by a whole bunch of students at Virginia Tech.

JILLIAN: Cool. Thank you.

ASHLEY: No, it's my pleasure, because it really, tryborg versus cyborg, it really helps them pick out in literature, like when we're reading about different advertisements about technologies and a lot of the hypes that goes along in sort of these media narratives and social narratives about technology, they'll start, themselves, labeling our authors into [laughing] tryborgs and cyborgs!

JILLIAN: I love this. I wish I could witness this. That's wonderful.

ASHLEY: It's such a useful tool, this vocabulary you've brought.

ALICE: I agree. I think we needed this term, and I think that's why when I read it, I was like, oh, my god! Finally, somebody is looking deep into my soul! They saw me! And I think there's something about, let's say, these damn tryborgs that, you know, they fetishize these things that are really just like absolute necessities in our lives. And I think that the fetishization and just the kinda commercialization in terms of like— Oh, you know, one term I just really hate is "wearable tech." Right now, that's a super-hot trend. You know, everybody has something that's like wearable tech. And it's just like they kind of forget that this is a extension and expansion of what disabled people have been experiencing and doing for decades. And I think that's another thing about tryborgs is that, not only can they opt out, but it's also about this co-optation of our culture.

JILLIAN: Absolutely. And it veers into, I don't know how to say this, but there's something despicable about tryborgs and capitalism and the way that tryborgs are wanting to sell us on this machine that climb stairs for you instead of putting in ramps as the law says that you must since 1990. Yeah. So, there's definitely a fetishization about new tech. And there's all this money for tryborg creations at the same time as actual cyborgs are on GoFundMe, begging for their lives.

[bouncy electronica music break]

The effect of futurists' call for a future without disability

ALICE: So, as we talked about, cyborgs are definitely a part of a past, our present, and our future. And yet, there are these people who identify as futurists who really believe, and people in speculative fiction, who truly believe that disability will not exist in the future, the idea that in this better world in the future, there will be an absence of disability and pain and suffering through advancements in medicine and technology. And what are your thoughts about that in terms of just the future of cyborg futures and disability in the future?

JILLIAN: I mean, I have so many thoughts. For one thing, it just seems like a repetition of a eugenics desire for disabled people: to get rid of us, to euthanize us, sterilize us. So, in one sense, this futurism looks very similar to pre-Holocaust Europe's futurism. But on the other hand, I kind of want to reply to the futurists with this absurd notion that they're going to eliminate war.

ASHLEY: Yeah, no. When we think about, I think you're exactly right, Jillian, on the link to eugenics here. Right. There was a lecture. I remember it was being advertised, and I about blew a gasket. And I emailed the organizer because the title of the talk was [00:16:58]The [0.0s] End of Disability.

JILLIAN: Wow.

ASHLEY: And this person, and I asked the organizers, "Is this person disabled?" Right? 'Cause I might give them a pass if they had some sort of disability story like about the community, or it could be a different story than we're gonna end disability through cures, right? I could imagine something creative and interesting, maybe. It would be hard to with that title. And I tried to explain why this was a terrible [laughs] title for a talk: *The End of Disability*. Because when you say, "the end of disability," you mean the end of disabled people, right? And if we value the disability community, it doesn't mean that everyone has to love their disabilities or that we're some sort of disability supremacist situation.

JILLIAN: [laughs] Though we might be.

ASHLEY: Well, I mean, we don't have to. We don't have to [inaudible]—

JILLIAN: We don't have to be, yeah.

ASHLEY: —a point. I'm just spit balling. There's the idea that what we all want is the end of disability is the wrong story to tell about disability. And it's inevitable that there will be disabled people. I mean, you're talking about the end of war, right? We're talking about the end of injuries and disabilities caused by war. But you'd have to eliminate a whole bunch of other things too, if you wanted to avoid disability. But even then, people are born disabled. So, I just took issue with the fact that, well, lots of issues. But it assumes so much about what disabled people want, and it assumes that you can't have a good life and be disabled. And this seems to me to be very much in line with a lot of religious conversations about disability, particularly around blindness, around being lame, for instance. That these things are narratives that seek out cures in religious traditions, and I see a lot of the talk in medicine as an extension of that.

ALICE: You know, it's amazing you mention that title, Ashley. Because two years two years ago at South by Southwest, Elizabeth Jackson tweeted and talked about she went to a session called *The End of Disability* as well. And it was all about how tech was going to fix every problem. And they were like, it's gonna be so amazing, this future where disabled people will not be disabled thanks to technology.

JILLIAN: Right. And why do they want to kill us so badly, is what I always wonder. Because the other alarming thing to me is that when someone—always with the best of intentions—suggests to me just in conversation, wouldn't it be great, though, if there was no disability? There's a gleam in their eye as they say this. It's sinister and strange to me.

ALICE: And it's not just chilling, but it's also fixing, is this idea that somehow, by using this device or this augmentation, that somehow that makes you whole. You know, that somehow, that disabled person is still, will be transformed. And I think that's another huge misconception is that can use these things to improve our lives. But it does not change, inherently, our disabled experience in society. And that's, you know, so much of it is about the way we're seen and the way our society is still very much ableist. And I think that's something that the social aspect, the political aspect will never really go away no matter how much money and technology you throw at us.

[bouncy electronica music break]

Technoableism and feet sales

ALICE: And Ashley, just related to that, you coin a term in your own scholarship called "technoableism.' So, can you tell the listeners what that is

ASHLEY: Yeah. So, technoableism is a specific brand or strain of ableism that I see as really pervasive, and it has a lot to do with this urge to normalize, to end disability. But people who are technoableist, they think they're gonna solve all your problems and cure you through technology. But they also end up branding their tech, talking about their tech, creating their tech with the idea that technological solutions will empower disabled people. So, it becomes techno-optimistic, but it also has this savior flavor to it. And it ends up lauding any tech for disability without even considering what disabled people want, usually.

So, I've loved—and I know you've shared some of this through Disability Visibility, Alice—the most recent exoskeleton debacle where disability Twitter smacks a lot of that rhetoric down really quickly. And I've been seeing I mean, exoskeletons have been in the news for a decade, and bloggers in the disability community have been talking about this. But it's not as widely known that not everyone is waiting for the exoskeleton. And in fact, it serves a much smaller population than most people who are boosters of it would think. But the way in which that gets talked about, right? Well, we're gonna have this, and then we won't need sidewalks. Or it's gonna be a game changer. Most technologies for disability are not game changers.

JILLIAN: Mmhmm.

ASHLEY: Some of them will be incremental improvements, and that is great. I like incremental improvements. I mean, you were talking about your knee, Jillian—

JILLIAN: Right.

ASHLEY: —which is an incremental improvement.

JILLIAN: It was. It was in the sense that I just don't fall. And so, I don't like falling, particularly. And I could expect probably six falls a year on a hinge-style knee. And I just don't fall on this knee. However, I love your term technoableism. And it also reminds me of this leg or even techno-optimism, I think you also said. Because when they sold me on this leg, they're like, you'll love it. It's great. You can golf. Well, I don't golf.

ASHLEY: [laughs]

JILLIAN: You can ski. I don't ski. I'm like, I'd like to run, though. I'd like to run for the first time 'cause I do the treadmill. I like a treadmill because it's borgian like me. It's consistent. I don't have to wander after the ground. They're like, well, sorry, you can't run on this leg. [laughing] So, I mean, that's just so emblematic of technoableism. We've prepared this computerized leg for x, y, and z, but not this thing the disabled person actually would like to try.

ASHLEY: I think about this. So, I don't know if you've been to any Amputee Coalition events. I know we're both amputees.

JILLIAN: I have not yet.

ASHLEY: They have like a show. We'll have to go some time 'cause it's fun to go with a friend who's similarly skeptical about what they're trying to sell you. There's this room full of, it's full of people trying to sell you feet. There's lots of feet here.

JILLIAN: Oh, wow. OK.

ASHLEY: You know how most amputees are like amputees. And one of the things that all legs have is usually feet, right? So, less so on the knees. They have some knees.

JILLIAN: Right.

ASHLEY: But it's a lot of feet and a lot of feet salespeople.

JILLIAN: Yes.

ASHLEY: They wanna tell you about all the things that you'll be able to do with their feet. And I mean, feet are fine.

JILLIAN: Yeah.

ASHLEY: If I got a new foot, it's just a better foot.

JILLIAN: Well, I'm so glad you're bringing up feet, Ashley, because I very much like my foot, which, you know, to our non-disabled audience, would be considered a fake foot, but to me is considered my real foot. However, without my bodily consent, the company who makes my foot, changed the design a year ago. And so, I'm really interested in the ways that we don't have bodily autonomy as cyborgs. This company just decided to redesign my foot, and now I've gotta learn how to walk all over again 'cause somebody named Brian had an idea.

ASHLEY: Oh, Brian. Oh, god.

JILLIAN: [laughs] No offense to the Brians of the world, but—

ASHLEY: There's a lot of assumptions that Brians make about what I'm gonna do on my foot. And one of them is about the skin color I'm gonna want on my foot and that I will want a skin color on my foot. I'm kind of sick of the Brians—I'm so sorry, everyone named Brian—

JILLIAN: [laughs]

ASHLEY: —thinking that what I'm gonna want looks like what I used to have.

JILLIAN: Wow. Yes.

ASHLEY: I really would like a blue sparkly foot, but no one will make one for me.

JILLIAN: OK, so you go into this room of feet, and there are no deviations from norm foot.

ASHLEY: There is a jet black one that came out two years ago, and I wear that foot because the foot shell doesn't look dirty. When you're pale like I am, they try to match you up to your color, but that's just a foot that looks dirty all the time and is gross after two weeks.

JILLIAN: Mmhmm.

ASHLEY: And my jet black foot at least doesn't look dirty, even though it wouldn't be my preferred color. But they think I want it to look like a human foot, and it's super creepy. They have those little doll toes on them, you know, the doll toes?

JILLIAN: Yes, I do.

ASHLEY: Why even have toes? I mean, there's a lot of assumptions about normalizing my body in a way that I don't even care about.

JILLIAN: Mmhmm.

ASHLEY: Those creepy doll feet though. Ew. OK.

ALICE: It gives you the opportunity to put toenail polish.

ASHLEY: [chuckles]

JILLIAN: There you go.

ALICE: You can reclaim your femininity!

ASHLEY: Oh god. No, and right now you can't see my foot, but I have googly eyes glued onto each toenail.

ALICE: Oh, I love it.

JILLIAN: Yes.

ASHLEY: So, there is that.

[bouncy electronica music break]

Cyborg Detective and Transmobility

ALICE: So, Jillian, you're coming out with a book of poetry on September 3rd, 2019 called *Cyborg Detective*. And already, that title just makes me wanna buy it. So, can you tell me a little bit more about *Cyborg Detective*?

JILLIAN: Sure. The book is a mix of invectives, which is a term that just means insult poems, and love poems. And I'm kind of looking at how disabled people get used in the Western literary canon. So, I'm calling out Raymond Carver's *Cathedral*, William Carlos Williams, our famous doctor poet in the book. Then I also am doing some cyborg techniques in the poems like biohacking poems or introducing a continuous poem called *Attack List*, which started with just a very modest question: where are the disabled women in international headlines? What are we doing? What are we up to? And then, in collecting all of the international headlines that feature those words, "disabled" and "woman," realizing the violence of that. And so, that poem continues on Twitter, @AttackList.

ASHLEY: I'm really excited about it.

JILLIAN: Well, thank you both. I'm so thrilled to kind of come into this conversation with other cyborgs and cripborgs and really claim cyborgness in a book of poems.

ALICE: Absolutely. 'Cause we need the poetry and art and other forms of culture to really explicate cyborg life, and I think just as much as we need research and scholarship. But I think we did more of our culture transmitted out there.

So, as we wrap up, do either of you have anything else you'd like to share about cyborgs or just cyborg life related to yourself or any other thoughts you have about cyborgs?

JILLIAN: I would love to rep for this article that came out called *Transmobility: [Rethinking the] Possibilities in Cyborg (Cripborg) Bodies* by Ashley and Bethany Stevens and Mallory K. Nelson. I love how this article, for any listener or reader; Hello, transcript readers—I love how this article shows cripborgs and cyborgs conversation from your own experiences, Ashley, your experience and your co-writers' experience.

ASHLEY: It was really fun to do. Thank you so much for mentioning it, Jillian.

JILLIAN: Yes!

ASHLEY: It means everything that you approve of it and like it because it is in this cyborg vein. I mean, you precede us in the literature on this, and we definitely take inspiration from your work as well.

ALICE: How about you, Ashley? Do you have any other shout-outs or anything that you wanna mention?

ASHLEY: I guess I'm wondering about your thoughts, Alice, about technology and disabled bodies. So, we read things from you, and you've written about science fiction. But this question of cyborgs, you've written about yourself as a cyborg as well. Do you have any thoughts to add about this? I'm interested.

Alice’s thoughts on her cyborg existence

ALICE: Well, you know, I think I have a lot of affection, and I feel a kinship with other disabled people who are cyborgs, and I feel like using that identity is another aspect of, “not all disabled people are cyborgs,” but there are a lot of disabled people who are cyborgs. So, I see us as kind of this very unique kind of subset that’s really vibrant. And I feel like there are more of us out there than we realize. And that, to me, is really interesting. How can we get folks to really think about their embodiment, but also just the inherent tensions, right?

I think I’ve written about this about this, too, but I'm skeptical of all these narratives around technology. And yet, I make it very plain and clear that my life would not be what it is today without technology. So, I use it, but yet, I do have qualms, right? And I think that's, I think we all kinda wrestle with these kind of issues. So, I think a cyborg life is not exactly this static thing, right? It’s a very constantly-evolving, very dynamic process. So, that, to me, is what is really interesting about my own cyborg existence, especially as somebody with a progressive disability, where over time, I have used more and more technology. My body has become weakened over time. It’s just the way it is. That’s just my trajectory. And I've seen how privileged I am to be alive in this particular time period so that I can have access to so many things that, let’s say, a generation or two ago, it wouldn’t even be possible. So, you know, I’m mindful of that, that so much of who I am today and what I can do today is very much a function of time, circumstance, and clearly, capital. So, those are kinda my thoughts.

ASHLEY: I like those. It sort of points to the fact that disabled people aren't so, even when I talk about technoableism, I'm not trying to be anti-technology, right? I love a lot of my devices, and even the ones I don't like, I like, right? [laughing] I'm using a lot of things. If I've chosen them, there's usually good reasons behind them. But I think I think that is important to keep in mind that what we want is good technologies, technologies that we want, and not just normalizing technologies or technologies that tell us, in normalizing us, that we weren't good enough before.

JILLIAN: I also just wanna add that I love this conversation we're having, and it highlights for me that we're in the naming and claiming phase. But I'm looking forward to the episode on cyborg love and cyborg friendship. Because one thing I've noticed coming into community with other cyborgs is conversation is easy. We can talk about having an especially borg day or whatever in a way that is distinct from conversations with non-borgs, to be honest. So, I love the possibilities that cyborg community raises.

ALICE: Absolutely. Well, you Jillian and Ashley, thank you so much!

ASHLEY: Thank you so much, Alice. This has been amazing.

JILLIAN: Yeah. Thanks for this time with you and your audience.

ALICE: Absolutely. I’m grateful to both of you, and I’m just so happy that we are cyborg friends.

JILL: Me too!

Wrap-up

[hip hop music]

♪ How far will they go?
Oh yeah, yeah
How far will they go?
Oh yeah, yeah…. ♪

ALICE: This podcast is a production of the *Disability Visibility Project*, an online community dedicated to creating, sharing, and amplifying disability media and culture. All episodes, including text transcripts, are available at DisabilityVisibilityProject.com/Podcast.

You can also find out more about Jillian and Ashley’s work on my website.

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Thanks for listening, and see you on the Internets! Byeee!!

♪ Rock it to the blast off
Stop, drop dance off ♪