Disability Visibility Podcast

Episode 7: Violence and Disabled People

Guests: Dustin Gibson and Mahdia Lynn

Host: Alice Wong

Transcript by Cheryl Green

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

Introduction

[radio static, voices singing with hip-hop beat]

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

ALICE WONG: Welcome to the Disability Visibility Podcast, conversations on disability politics, culture, and media. I'm your host, Alice Wong.

Today's episode is about police violence toward people with disabilities, especially multiply-marginalized disabled people.

Can you imagine a world without police or prisons? Can you imagine communities responding to violence from a place of love, justice, and accountability? Dustin Gibson and Mahdia Lynn are guests today, and they are two activists, dreamers, and revolutionaries who work on police accountability and prison abolition.

You'll hear us discuss effectiveness of police training, the pathologization of disabled people in the media, and the power of communities' response to pain and trauma. Please know that this episode was recorded on August 15, 2017, just two days after the hate-filled violence that took place Charlottesville, Virginia.

Are you ready? [electronic beeping] Away we go!

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

ALICE: I'm so excited to have both of you speak with me today. Would you mind, I guess, both telling me a little bit about yourself? Mahdia, you can go first if you want.

MAHDIA LYNN: All right. My name is Mahdia Lynn. I am a writer and educator and community organizer. I do most of my work as the Director of Masjid al-Rabia, which is a women-centered and LGBT-affirming pluralist Muslim mosque and community here in Chicago.

DUSTIN GIBSON: You know what? This is always a tough question to answer. I would describe myself as a community builder. I'm a Black disabled man. I live in Pittsburgh. I do most of my work here in Pittsburgh, take words from one of my comrades, T-Dubbo-O, I would say I'm a revolutionary in training. So, I would say a lot of my work is decentralized. I work with a lot of organizations on different topics or issues that all impact Black disabled people.

Checking in after the Charlottesville domestic terrorism

ALICE: Well, thank you both. Before we get started, I just thought we could take a little bit of time and just check in on how we're feeling. Because just a few days ago, we witnessed the horrific violence and domestic terrorism in Charlottesville by white supremacists. So, how are you both feeling, and what are your thoughts of what we've seen and heard the last few days?

MAHDIA: It's been a hard week, I guess. I was downtown yesterday at a rally, and there's just rage and numbness and passion and compassion. And it's a really difficult thing to navigate. I don't know how well I'm doing with it, but I'm still here. So, that's gotta count for something. How are you, Dustin?

DUSTIN: I've been thinking a lot about one of the issues that we always encounter as we're organizing is how do you utilize allies, even if we believe in such a thing as an ally or comrades. So, the one thing I do want to do is lift the name and the life and the existence of Heather Heyer and understand that when we talk about revolution, or we talk about obtaining liberation, that those ultimate sacrifices of life sometimes are critical and necessary, and we should honor all of those people. So, I've been thinking a lot about that and how we put our bodies on the line, and who does that? And then, what do we do with that to ensure that that loss of life or injury is not in vain. A lot of the KKK rhetoric or the white supremacist stuff I'm really familiar with. This is kind of the America that I know. I grew up in Wyoming, so we have open bigotry and almost accepted racism and xenophobia and homophobia. So, what I see in the images from Charlottesville, to me, it looked like a high school bonfire.

[deep, percussive music]

MAHDIA: You know, it's kind of bittersweet that so many people are kind of coming into a consciousness about these things for the first time now. It's great that these people that are finally acknowledging are prepared to fight. But also, it's like, what took you so damn long?

ALICE: I mean, it also gets me so angry as well in terms of the voices of marginalized people and how many of us have always been the ones to see things that are gonna happen. And usually, we're not taken seriously. Disabled people have been talking about it for months, and nobody listened until finally, people put their bodies on the line as we saw with ADAPT.

DUSTIN: Yeah, and even within the disability communities, I think about what it means for folks that live on multiple margins and how we're excluded. Even today, white supremacists are planning to have a rally here in Pittsburgh on Saturday. So, there's organizing going to counter protest that rally, and a lot of Deaf folks weren't' included in that because the interpreters weren't confirmed until late. While that was actually happening on the livestream, I'm texting people, I'm messaging folks, I'm asking if they could show interpreters on the livestream.

But all of these people are new coming into this movement. So, it's like a mass education needs to happen every single time, but that usually falls on the multiply-marginalized folks to do that educating. And it's usually free labor, and it's usually really taxing and traumatizing to also do that. As people come into the movement, we, as multiply-marginalized and disabled folks, usually end up doing that work for them all over again.

[mellow music]

Work related to violence and disabled people

ALICE: Can you both tell me a little bit about some of the work you do related to violence and disabled people?

MAHDIA: Yeah, sure. A lot of my work here in Chicago and digitally centers police accountability and reform and prison abolition. 'Cause as it is right now, it's police overwhelmingly who end up responding to mental health crises, and the prison industrial complex is the primary source of "treatment" for people with mental illness, and I'm using "treatment" in the biggest scare quotes imaginable there.

ALICE: Yeah, for people who are not familiar with abolition work, can you describe what that is?

MAHDIA: Yeah, it's a matter of where we try to imagine a better world, where instead of people being locked up, we have community initiatives, we have mental health support, we have a better future where our incarcerated family can be free as well as we are.

[rhythmic, melodic music]

ALICE: In disability, I've talked to these people as well, in terms of trying to explain this, and there's so many people that just can't imagine it because they always ask me, "Oh, what about serial murders?" Or, "What do we do about the truly violent people?" So, what do you say to folks who say that there needs to be some sort of punishment for violence? How do you respond to those kind of reactions to abolition work?

MAHDIA: Violence doesn't happen in a vacuum, right? And crime doesn't happen in a vacuum. Crime is a product of poverty, of white supremacy. It's a product of the society that chooses not to invest in education or community mental health. So, by imagining this future without prisons, where we have community mental health initiatives, where we have a government that invests in its people, invests in schools instead of prisons, we're not just picturing a world where prisons don't exist, and everything else is the same. We're envisioning a world where communities can support one another.

[rhythmic, melodic music]

DUSTIN: Mahdia, can I ask you why police reform rather than abolition?

MAHDIA: My own personal politics: I believe in holding incrementalist and radical politics kind of at the same time. I think of myself as an abolitionist. At the end of the day, I wanna see an abolishing of the police and an end to prisons. But I also look at the system that we have today, and I am willing to accept reform on the way to abolition if it means more lives are saved, and it means our communities are safer along the way.

DUSTIN: Thank you. I appreciate that. I know that's one of the barriers in conversation with folks is the people that at least outwardly say reform against the folks that outwardly say abolition. Sometimes that keeps us from working with each other, so I appreciate your thoughts on that.

[rhythmic, melodic music]

ALICE: So, how about you, Dustin? Can you tell us a little bit about what you've done recently and what you've done in the past?

DUSTIN: Yeah. Well, I guess my work started off as just supporting other disabled folks and building community there and being in community with them. And if you do that for long enough, then you see violence in different variations and forms. I've now learned how to name it a little bit better than I had before.

I view violence to be lack of affordable and accessible housing and forced removal from your community. I think it's important to name violence in school suspensions, and all of this is disability justice work. In being in disabled communities long enough, that leads us to police interactions, and it leads us to jails and then prisons. So, I would say it's a broad spectrum of the things that I work on, but as we know, it's all inter-connected.

I did work for a Center for Independent Living. About three blocks away, Bruce Kelly Jr., a Black man with psychiatric disabilities was murdered by the Port Authority police here, just a few blocks away. They left his body outside for eight hours. All he had a was a pocket knife. He was chased by 12 officers. So, that kind of shocked me into a movement, to see that happen so close to the young folks I work with, to see how it impacts them to know that we were literally right down the street and could've offered an alternative to bullets.

So, with that, I jumped into the movement with police accountability, much of what Mahdia was talking about, and creating alternatives rather than police response. I think the last thing that people need if they're in crisis, which a lot of the times they aren't, police typically escalate situations rather than are needed to de-escalate. But I think the last thing we want is a lethal response. So, a lot of mine's is rooted in that alternative methods. That looks like what Mahdia was talking about as far as community support for people with psychiatric disabilities or folks that have experienced trauma. And then, that will inevitably lead to prisons, where I do some work there. A lot of that looks like transitioning and then also naming disability and working with people to deconstruct the systems and the reasons why they got there. I do more learning than teaching while I'm in prisons, to be honest.

Thoughts about police training and police reform

ALICE: Right now, there seems to be a lot of money and efforts, especially by local police departments to train their officers on how to interact with D/deaf and disabled people. What is your thought on police training and whether that is effective or is one solution as part of the broader effort on police reform?

DUSTIN: I think one of the things with training is it becomes this conversation about how to treat humans like humans. So, in some sense, we're being viewed as inherently subhuman and needing some type of special treatment in order to not be victims of brutality, violence, harassment, and death. So, I think it's inherently flawed there. Also, when we talk about police training, typically the only training that they have when it comes to people with disabilities is the CIT training, which is the Crisis Intervention. So, in that itself, it inherently says that we're always in a crisis, and somehow, we need de-escalated. That excludes a lot of people with physical disabilities that are brutalized in different ways. I think there's a lot of problems just inherently with what they have. I mean, that's why we see the people that are killed by police more times than not have some sort of disability.

MAHDIA: Yeah, I think these issues are systemic, and they are just so all-encompassing in our society that honestly, I think about this as a transgender woman and as a transgender woman who has suffered abuse at the hands of police, a three-hour training on how to be nice to LGBT people isn't gonna change Officer Bill's perspective that transwomen aren't human. It doesn't change the inherent power structures. It doesn't even attempt to address the systemic issues.

DUSTIN: Yeah, I think training is a part of that militarization of the police, and it's like adding another weapon to their arsenal. What we see is like when the officers have actually received some type of training, and they still perpetuate violence or inflict violence, they utilize it as a justification to say that they didn't receive adequate training, or they did receive the training, and they adhered to it. So, it puts the onus and responsibility back on the person that was victimized.

[bright, staccato music]

What's missing in media coverage about violence and disabled people?

ALICE: I just wanna switch gears and ask you both, what do you think is missing in the media coverage about violence and disabled people? Because clearly, there's a lot of coverage in terms of all sorts of groups, but we still don't see that much specifically about violence of multiply-marginalized disabled people or violence about disabled people in general. What do you think is missing, and what do you wanna see in terms of stories and actual investigations?

MAHDIA: I mean, I think throughout the media--especially I'm talking about people with mental illness mostly--throughout the media, people with mental illness are superhuman, violent monsters. M. Night Shyamalan had a movie this summer, right, *Split*, where the entire plot is that there is this person with mental illness that is not only evil and erratic and violent but is literally superhuman. And that's pretty much all we get. We're superhuman threats. We're monstrosities that need to be put down.

ALICE: Mmhmm.

MAHDIA: And in reality, people with mental illness are far more likely to be victims of violence than to perpetrate it, especially by police who are overwhelmingly the first responders to mental health crises and who are raised in this media environment to think of mentally ill people as monsters. And the rest of our prison system, they would rather lock citizens up than work on competent mental health care.

DUSTIN: I mean, there's erasure there that until we name the disabilities, we won't actually get to the solutions. And who's being impacted: It's important to name that group, whoever it is. I think it's less about what's missing and more about what's there as far as furthering stigma and how every single time we have some type of tragic event, the ableist rhetoric comes out to say that they must be mentally ill to commit some type of heinous act. And what I think that does is really defocus us from what's actually going on. I think about Dylann Roof, a white supremacist that murdered nine Black people, and the media began to talk about how he must have a mental illness. Rather than saying you know, he's a white supremacist, and this is how he has been indoctrinated, and this is how he developed this ideology that would lead him to murdering people. So, I think that it furthers the stigma, and that takes away from what's actually going on.

[pensive music]

Disability narratives, trauma, and ableist language

ALICE: Do either of you have any ideas in terms of suggestions that you wanna-- If you could talk to reporters or journalists, how to actually cover violence of disabled people in a much more authentic and respectful manner and accurate manner. Do you have any ideas or suggestions?

MAHDIA: I think Dustin's point about the way that we pathologize and ascribe mental illness to whomever we don't agree with. Like on social media for activists even and reporters and

everything, it's still just kind of OK to use ableist language. I mean, how many people call Donald Trump "crazy" in a day? Or other politicians or things that they don't disagree with. There's a carelessness of language that tends to frustrate me. And I think that buys into this pathologization. I think there's a connection between those two things.

DUSTIN: The ableist language is rampant in all forms of media, no matter what we're actually covering. I think that is because a lot of these people that are actually reporting on it are not necessarily too close to the people being impacted by it. So, I think that's one issue is that when people are harmed, those folks should be given the platform and the voice. And I don't see that happen too often. It's usually somebody telling someone else's story, and they're profiting off of it.

MAHDIA: I think people still have a narrative in their head where the system works, and the system helps, that if you have a mental health crisis, and you get sent to an institution, you spend a few months there, and then you come back. And then you're better. When the reality is so often the exact opposite.

I mean, my own story as a survivor of police violence and police brutality: I had a mental health crisis, and someone called 911. The police came, and when the police realized that I was a transgender woman, things changed. I was mocked and abused. Hours later, I woke up handcuffed to a hospital bed. And I've spent months in hospitals and institutions, and the fact is, I have experienced more trauma on the inside of the system, as a woman, as a transgender woman, as a vulnerable person who needed help than I ever did on the outside. That trauma follows me. It's been five years since this incident, or these incidences happened, and I'm just finally coming to be able to talk about it.

And it's something that's lost on people, is that this is a broken system, and this system, it does not heal people. It does not help people. It causes irrevocable harm to anyone that's unlucky enough to fall into the system, and it contributes to this endless cycle of violence, of trauma, of exacerbating illness. And we can't find wellness as individuals, as a community, unless we change it entirely, unless we have massive structural change in the system.

Community strength

ALICE: Mahdia, you talked a little bit about trauma. I think trauma is such a big thing that's still, in a lot of ways, very private. Trauma is not something that people talk about in these really tough times. It's not to say that this time is tougher than before. How do you keep going? How do you find strength and community to keep doing what you do?

MAHDIA: For me, I think it's been the community that we've found and fostered here in Chicago. I mean, the radical community, the movement towards justice here is so dynamic, and there's so many amazing and brilliant people that there's just a constant source of inspiration to keep going. And then the community that I have with the Muslim community that I'm a part of that's centering Muslim women and Muslim LGBT people and other marginalized Muslims. My faith has been a very strong part of that and the community that I have because I know that self-care is not always enough for me, that I need other people to be there. And I need care and support from the community. You know, I think that's one of the hidden ableist demons hidden in this concept of self-care, it's part of this American independence where you have to be able to be completely in control of our lives and our care and our wellness when the reality is that it takes a community to keep a lot of us in fighting shape, as it were.

DUSTIN: Yeah, I agree whole-heartedly with what Mahdia said. I think when we do build community, it's usually rooted in love. I think that revolutionary love is ultimately what leads us down paths of freedom, which liberate us at some point. So, I do believe in building community, being able to uplift each other, being able to celebrate victories no matter how small or minute they may seem, that they're all important. And then also acknowledging each other, however that looks. For some folks, it's assigning a message to them. For some folks, it's telling them, giving them a call, sending them a small gift, whatever that is, but acknowledging sometimes the pain, sometimes the struggle, but then also the beauty of us just being able to exist in this world that we live in.

The Harriet Tubman Collective is a collective that I'm a part of where it's Black disabled dreamers and lovers and organizers. It's just a space where you can actually feel whole, and through that, we acknowledge all of our differences. And although we're not completely accessible all the time or giving each other the amount of voice that we deserve, we're attempting to do that. And that, to me, is what love looks like, is attempting to include everybody in a radical way.

[bright, mellow music]

ALICE: How can people reach you both if anybody would like to know more about what you do and who you are?

DUSTIN: I'm pretty easily accessible via Twitter. My handle is @notthreefifths, all of the words spelled out, no numbers.

MAHDIA: You can find me on Twitter @mahdialynn. I have a website that's the same, just mahdialynn.com. I would recommend checking out the Masjid al-Rabia website, the mosque that I run. You can find us on Twitter and online @Masjidalrabia and masjidalrabia.org.

[hip-hop]

ALICE: This podcast is a production of the Disability Visibility Project, an online community dedicated to creating, sharing, and amplifying disability media and culture.

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Thanks for listening, and see you on the Internets!

♪ Move your hands on

Try to keep your pants on

Rock it to the blast off

Stop drop dance off ♪