



# **TRANS BODIES, TRANS SELVES**

**A RESOURCE FOR THE TRANSGENDER COMMUNITY**

**EDITED BY LAURA ERICKSON-SCHROTH**

**INTRODUCTION BY JENNIFER FINNEY BOYLAN**

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Edited by

**Laura Erickson-Schroth**

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# 4

## DISABILITIES AND DEAF CULTURE

Syrus Marcus Ware and Zack Marshall

**WHEN YOU CONSIDER THE WORD *DISABILITY***, what comes to mind? Do you immediately think about someone using a wheelchair or another form of physical disability? Or maybe you think about other disabilities that affect the body? The meaning of the word *disability* can be very broad. For many people, disability is about a sense of difference. But it is also about the diversity of human experience.

There are links between trans identities, disabilities, and Deafness. There are many ways that people experience disability and gender. These experiences can overlap and interconnect through our identities, experiences of oppression, and community building. Instead of difference being perceived as negative, what would it be like if all human bodies, minds, and ways of thinking were celebrated as part of human experience? Regardless of how we define or understand the concept of “disability,” trans people with disabilities are an integral part of LGBTQ communities.

### DEFINING DISABILITY

Most often, disabilities are formally identified and labeled by professionals such as medical doctors and psychologists. These professionals have been trained within a specific medical model that frames disability as a medical condition or diagnosis. Using standardized assessment tools, they decide who fits the criteria and assign labels according to this system. Being assigned a medical label may or may not feel like a true reflection of how you think about yourself.

Professionals do not always agree on what they consider disabilities. Individuals with disabilities have also contributed to an understanding of disability through disability scholarship and activism to change laws. There are over 40 definitions of disability within federal law alone (Ballan et al., 2011).

In the United States, the main tool for diagnosing mental illness (and therefore also for determining what conditions are labeled as psychiatric disabilities) is the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)*, currently in its fifth edition (*DSM-5*). Diagnoses in the *DSM* include major depressive disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, learning disabilities, posttraumatic stress disorder, and gender dysphoria.

### IS BEING TRANS A DISABILITY?

Gender dysphoria is a diagnosis in the *DSM*. For many trans people, in order to obtain access to medical transition, it is necessary to be diagnosed with gender dysphoria (GD) (formerly gender identity disorder [GID]). Similar to other diagnoses, gender dysphoria is a mental health diagnosis created by the American Psychiatric Association. Within this way of thinking, people labeled with gender dysphoria have a mental health “problem.” In this model, people with GD are also disabled.

Labeling all trans people with gender dysphoria pathologizes trans identities. It suggests that being trans is a psychiatric condition, despite multiple experiences and expressions of gender throughout human history. It also suggests that being trans is a problem, one that is outside of the norm of human experience.

### RESISTING PATHOLOGIZATION

Similar to trans identities, disability identities can be imposed, rejected, accepted, or embraced and there is no “right” way to live as a person with a disability. People may or

The Yahoo group QueerDisability connects LGBTQ people with disabilities.

The Federal Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) specifically excludes transgender people from its discrimination protections. Different groups of trans activists disagree on whether it makes sense to challenge this exclusion.



CJ Fung from *Our Compass*, a documentary co-written by LGBTQ youth labeled with intellectual disabilities (photo by Patrick Struys).

may not identify with the label, and this may shift over time. There are many who proudly call themselves disabled people, or people with disabilities.

How we relate to being labeled with a disability has a lot to do with what we have been taught about disabilities, oppression, and how our identities intersect. Within society, disability is often seen as an individual problem with disabled people's bodies or minds needing to be cured, fixed, or managed (Oliver, 1996). There is a global movement of people who disagree that difference should be diagnosed, labeled, and treated. As part of this movement, trans activism since the early 1980s has challenged the classification of transsexuality as a psychiatric diagnosis.

When people begin to question medical and psychiatric labels, they may also realize that disability has a lot to do with the world around us, meaning that it is created and reinforced by society. Societies limit access to people, locations, and activities by creating barriers. For example, we build buildings that have stairs at the entrances, limiting who can and cannot enter; we schedule long meetings that require a particular kind of brain work that limits who can participate; and we show movies in the classroom that do not have captioning and thus limit who can understand the information.

Rather than thinking about disability as an individual problem, there are other options. The *social model of disability* recognizes societal barriers and the impact of broader systems as the problem, rather than focusing on individuals in isolation.

“Disability is thus not just a health problem. It is a complex phenomenon, reflecting the interaction between features of a person's body and features of the society in which he or she lives. Overcoming the difficulties faced by people with disabilities requires interventions to remove environmental and social barriers.”—World Health Organization

#### QUEER AND DIAGNOSTICALLY CHALLENGED

*Rosalyn Forrester is a queer, pagan woman of color who was born with transsexualsim and lives with chronic pain. She's fought to create changes in family law and in how police treat people in the greater trans\* communities. She's also involved in the Trans Forming Families project.*

Many queer-identified and trans-identified people living with a variety of abilities face challenges while intermingling within the greater queer-identified and temporarily able-bodied (TAB) community. I expected to feel included and safe within my own queer community, but in fact it is a place where a person born with transsexualism who is also living with ability issues can actually be made to feel even worse and more left out. A marginalized group, marginalizing others. Go figure.

Queer community events often take place in nonaccessible spaces. When it is brought to the organizer’s attention, the response they give is usually something like “This space was all we could find” or “We never thought about access since no one has brought it to our attention before.” This makes it feel like it is our fault for not doing the hard work of teaching them beforehand.

Being queer, of color, born with transsexualism, and having a disability, it is hard to know where I am welcome sometimes. Sometimes I walk into a support group for women with disabilities and learn that to them I’m not equally female. I was not born as they were. Seeing signs that separate my identities like “women and trans\* people welcome” or “queer and trans\* people welcome” have me still feeling as if I am some sort of other species.

The greater queer community has to understand that we are human, we are women, we are men, we want to belong, and we do belong. We want and deserve a chance to not feel like outsiders looking in all the time.

*want* is a film by queer femme Loree Erickson that explores sex and disability by using sexually explicit images to show people with disabilities as sexy and to challenge the desexualization and devaluation of people with disabilities.

The International Stop Trans Pathologization (STP) Campaign is an activist initiative that works for the depathologization of trans expressions, trajectories, and identities, and hosts the International Day of Action for Trans Depathologization.

## ABLEISM IS A SYSTEM

The term *ableism* is used to describe prejudice or discrimination against people with disabilities. Ableism manifests in systemic exclusion of disabled communities from access to the right to self-determination and in daily individual micro aggressions and violence. *Audism* is the systemic exclusion of Deaf communities from access to self-determination in similar ways and the prioritizing of hearing ability and the use of verbal language. Similarly, cisnormativity reinforces the notion that there are only two genders/sexes and that these are mutually exclusive and set for life. This suggests an “ideal body,” positioning trans bodies as outside of the preconceived norm. Ableism, audism, and cisnormativity are interconnected systems that combine in specific ways for trans people with disabilities.

## ACTIVISM: LINKS BETWEEN DISABILITY AND TRANS COMMUNITIES

People labeled with disabilities have a long history of organizing for social change. Some disabilities activists have worked for laws that recognize differences and provide for ways that all people can have access to the same opportunities. Like trans activists, disabilities activists have also led movements for depathologization and self-determination.

It is important to recognize that activism to remove GD from the *DSM* can come across as inherently ableist.

*“I feel there’s a very negative tension between mental health and trans issues at times. I worry that trans activists are trying a bit too enthusiastically to flee the ‘stigma’ of mental illness with regards to issues like GID (‘gender identity disorder’) or GD (‘gender dysphoria’) being in the DSM, and that this exacerbates the stigma on mental illness. What’s SO bad about being mentally ill? Surely the problem is the stigma attached to all the various conditions in the DSM more than GID or GD being in there.”*

By working to remove GD from the *DSM*, are we inadvertently saying that the guide remains a valid tool for pathologizing other mental states and mental difference? This suggests there are those whose identities do need to be in the *DSM*. This does not challenge the underlying power of the psychiatric system itself. While mental health providers may feel it is important to categorize people’s experiences, there may be other approaches that are less stigmatizing.

When trans people say that they do not want to be labeled with mental health diagnoses, this reinforces the idea that there is such a thing as “mental health” and “mental illness.” These are socially constructed diagnoses. In fact, there are many different ways that people feel, think, and process information. It is important to question why any of these experiences are pathologized. All of our lived experiences could simply be recognized and supported.

*“In the transgender community, I’m also involved with the disabled—mainly the mentally ill, mentally disabled, etc.—community. I generally tend to find much more understanding of ableism and classism issues within this segment of the*



Activism (Elenore Toczynski).

*trans community, as well as much more acceptance of less binary identities, less adherence to gender norms, etc. I also tend to see more caring about intersectionality. And of course I tend to relate much more to trans people who also struggle with mental illness.”*

By suggesting that trans identity does not belong in the *DSM* but that other identities do, we need to be careful not to further marginalize trans people who identify as disabled, whether they identify as having gender dysphoria or another disability altogether. Are there ways of developing a trans activism that is supportive of those of us diagnosed with psychiatric disabilities (i.e., labeled with a mental health diagnosis)? How do we fight for trans identity outside of ableist discourse?

## FORMING COMMUNITY

There are thriving communities of Deaf and disabled people all over the world. In these communities, both online and out in society, people often find safety, support, and connection in experiences of difference. Sometimes people find connection about the experience of disability but do not find a similar sense of support when sharing other parts of their lives, such as being trans or people of color. Similarly, some may be active members of LGBTQ communities and feel like outsiders within those communities because of a lack of awareness about disabilities or trans identities.

*“I am disabled and genderqueer, but I seem to be the only visible one in my neighborhood.”*

*“I’m an autistic trans person, but I’m not part of any specific group which addresses both of those concerns. I’ve come across a lot of people who are both online, and I have a couple of good friends who are also both. It’s been very fulfilling to discover which experiences I have in common with them.”*

*“I am deaf, and know a few other deaf trans people online (two of whom I have met in person).”*

*“While I do live in a major city with a fairly sizable Deaf population, and a fairly sizable trans population, there are very few (if any) other deaf trans people around, and I think this is true of most other cities as well. Everyone else who is*

“Sins Invalid: An Unashamed Claim to Beauty in the Face of Invisibility” is a performance project that celebrates artists with disabilities, centralizing artists of color and queer and gender-variant artists as communities that have been historically marginalized. Normative paradigms of “normal” and “sexy” are challenged, offering instead a vision of beauty and sexuality inclusive of all individuals and communities.

The Ontario Rainbow Alliance of the Deaf hosts social events and provides educational workshops that are geared toward providing a safe space for the Deaf and Queer community and increasing Deaf Queer visibility within the larger community.



Participants from Compass, a social group for LGBTQ youth labeled with intellectual disabilities, at Griffin Centre in Toronto (photo by Patrick Struys).

*deaf and trans I communicate with online via e-mail, instant messaging, or video chat. I think being deaf and trans binds us together a little bit closer, because we have two common experiences being part of two minority groups.”*

QUESTIONS FROM THE PUBLIC

*Josh Smith is a creative and tenacious artist who identifies as a genderqueer no-op trans guy with a physical disability.*

What is wrong with you  
 When will you die  
 Can they fix you  
 Can you have sex  
 Why are you in a wheelchair  
 Are your legs broken  
 Can you cum  
 How long do you have to live  
 Are you a Girl or a Boy  
 Why don't you just Transition  
 What's wrong with your voice  
 How do you have sex



Audrey Lorde was a black lesbian poet, scholar, and activist who experienced disability. Lorde (1984) wrote about the importance of bringing an integrated analysis to any academic or activist project, explaining: “[M]y fullest concentration of energy is available to me only when I integrate all the parts of who I am, openly, allowing power from particular sources of my living to flow back and forth freely through all my different selves, without the restrictions of externally imposed definition. Only then can I bring myself and my energies as a whole to the service of those struggles which I embrace as part of my living” (p. 121).

Many of us are part of racialized and Indigenous communities and experience trans, disability, and Deaf cultures in unique ways because of overlapping experiences of colonization and racism. Similarly, we may come from working-class and poor communities where experiences of gender and ability are profoundly affected by experiences of classism and access to class privilege. Ultimately, we have intersecting identities and many of us have claimed or reclaimed new terms or labels that have personal and specific meaning. Acknowledging these differences is important. Writing that portrays all disabled people as white, straight, and non-trans/cissexual is limiting, implying that all racialized people are nondisabled, and that all disabled people are white/nonracialized (Ejiogu & Ware, 2008).

## DIVERSITY, DISABILITY, AND DEAFNESS

Deaf trans people represent another aspect of the diversity in LGBTQ communities. Deafness is typically recognized as separate from disability. Although Deaf culture intersects with disability, it is also distinct. Deaf culture is part of a unique linguistic and cultural community where being a Deaf person is considered a trait, not a disability (Jones, 2002). For this reason we also capitalize the D in Deaf, taking the lead from Deaf communities (Mog & Swarr, 2008).

### DEAF AND DISABILITY IDENTITIES: AN INTERVIEW WITH TARA BIRL AND EMILY SORS

#### *Trans Bodies, Trans Selves (TBTS): How do you identify?*

**Tara Birl (TB):** Personally, I identify as female with genderqueer sparkles. I don't really like the trans labels. Probably the most accurate of the trans labels would be transsexual, but I like to just identify female with genderqueer sparkles!

**Emily Sors (ES):** Hmmm... how I identify is really complex. In terms of queer, well, I'm trans, queer, poly, pansexual, and kinky. I identify as a woman, gender-wise (and I'm not genderqueer, either). There's a lot of other stuff attached as well, mostly relating to my medical conditions (I have way too many of them). Being hard of hearing is one of them. I don't really know that I identify with the Deaf community, though—I've never really been a part of it, and my hearing impairment isn't really enough to affect me too much. I can usually get by even without my hearing aid. I am starting to learn ASL now, though, as my partner is also hearing impaired and we decided it would probably be a good thing for us to be able to sign to each other.

#### *TBTS: Is there anything you would like readers to know about your experience of gender and Deaf culture?*

**ES:** The only thing I've really noticed is that, back when I was a guy, people assumed more often that I just wasn't listening to them. Now, people understand more readily that I have a hearing loss. I would assume it has something to do with the stereotype that women are good listeners.

**TB:** Well, I'm personally pretty new to the Deaf community. I've been out as trans since 2005. I have only been in the Deaf community since 2009. I think there are lots of cross-cultural differences. For instance, in the Deaf community, it's expected to be very straightforward and direct with questions, so you get a lot of very direct questions about your gender, surgery/legal status, etc. These things in the trans community (and even in the larger LGBTIQQA community or even the hearing world) would be downright rude. Of course, you do get these types of questions in the Hearing world, but they usually are much more subtle, and rarely on very first meeting a stranger. In the Deaf world, those questions are much more common when you meet strangers for the first time. It's in some ways very refreshing.

I imagine someone deaf all their lives (or even most of their lives) would have fairly different experiences. I can't speak for them. I do have a few friends that were deaf at/near birth and came out trans later in life, but it would be wrong for me to speak about their experiences.

I think one GREAT advantage to being deaf and trans versus being trans and hearing is not having to hear the taunts, the verbal abuse, and hatred that come your way when you are discovered as being trans. I remember when I was hearing and would walk down the street, verbal abuse was a very daily activity in my life, regardless of where in the United States I happened to be that day. Now I never hear it!

#### *TBTS: What do you think are some of the ways that trans activism and Deaf culture overlap, or possibly disconnect?*

**TB:** I think there are similarities. Both groups of people face oppression in their everyday lives. A lot of that oppression is simply because of ignorance. People don't understand either one. In other ways, I think the Deaf community is WAY ahead of the trans communities here in the United States. I'm not saying there isn't work to do, but in the trans communities, the laws protecting us are barely happening at the state level. California being mostly complete (law wise), but pretty much every other state WAY behind. The trans community is still battling the medicalization process of us, like we are a disease. We have a LOT of work to do to get out of the *DSM*. I like to think the Deaf community has pretty much gotten past that, and our language of ASL is finally accepted as a language. Again, I think it all is oppression, and that both communities (and ALL communities of people that face oppression) have to come and work together, and find all of our commonalities and work toward ending ALL oppression, not just the ones that affect "my" communities.

**ES:** To me, Deaf activism seems so well established, though I don't know much about the history of it. Trans activism is relatively new, and still putting down roots. We're making incremental steps, but it's been slow, and there's a lot of backlash and hate.

Planet DeafQueer (planet.deafqueer.com) is a community Web site devoted to empowering the DeafQueer community and Allies.

“The stolen body, the reclaimed body, the body that knows itself and the world, the stone and the heat which warms it: my body has never been singular. Disability snarls into gender. Class wraps around race. Sexuality strains against abuse. This is how to reach beneath the skin.” —Eli Clare (2009), *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation* (Boston, MA: South End Press).

## TRANS PEOPLE AS DISABILITY ALLIES

There are many ways that people with disabilities are excluded from services, supports, and social and community events as a result of inaccessible physical spaces and environments which fail to accommodate disabled and Deaf people.

*“I’m a cripple (I have arthritis) but I’m not really active in the disabled community. It just means I will only go to queer community events that aren’t physically demanding: I can sit down and talk, but I won’t dance all night or go on long walks.”*

*“I’m disabled but don’t have a disabled community. My larger trans community is mostly abled, and they’re working on their ableism and that’s definitely hard! It’s hard to go out to gay bars when they have strobe lights that give me seizures. I feel like being trans and disabled are important experiences that can’t really be untied from each other. And it’s frustrating that at the end of the day when I want to relax from all the transphobia I have to deal with out in the world I come home to my community only to deal with ableism.”*

*“I’m involved with a group called crazyqueers on Livejournal which is aimed at those who are queer/trans who have mental health issues or things like Aspergers/autism. I think it’s a lot more tight-knit and more relaxed because of the various things we talk about and we don’t talk about gender theory so much. We worry more about mental health issues than gender ones.”*

*“As a disabled mixed-race woman, I’m talking to everyone equally. I have friends among every race and creed and religion, but again I leave the activism to healthier people. I just have my friends and they matter to me more than analyzing whose oppression is easier or harder or whatever. All oppression is bad, period.”*

The next time you are planning a trans community event consider how you could make it more open to people with intellectual disabilities. Set aside funds for American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters. Provide audio description of visual images and video/DVDs, and/or open or closed captioning of films and video clips. Hold your event in a physically accessible location and consider how cost, transportation, the organization of the room, and the activities you have planned may or may not be welcoming to people with differing abilities than your own. Work in solidarity and in collaboration with trans disability communities and help support their work and the fight for self-determination.

### LIBERATION DOESN'T LEAVE PEOPLE BEHIND: ABLEISM, TRANSPHOBIA, CLASSISM, AND RACISM

*A Campus Pride Hot List artist, 2013 Trans Justice Funding Project Panelist, and 2013 Trans 100 Honoree whose work has been featured in anthologies and on stages globally, Kay Ulanday Barrett (www.kaybarrett.net) is a poet, performer, and educator, navigating life as a disabled pin@y-amerikan transgender queer in the United States with struggle and laughter.*

Life as a brown, trans, physically disabled crip person leaves me judged by all systems—the government systems that give harsh pity in public “assistance,” the police who use more than billy clubs to enforce their brutality, the employers, the public transportation officials, the doctors who steal our agency of our own experiences and have no idea what to do with genderqueer people. All of these at once feel like an open wound, with multiple stings.

Meetings, bedrooms, protests—these can be able-bodied supremacist spaces. The way crip and sick disabled people are treated in ableist settings is informed by gender binaries and unrealistic expectations. A trans disabled person like myself is not a strong leader if he’s not in the march. A trans woman crip is seen as less effective if she’s not at all of the pivotal events. Our everyday ways of love and movement are polluted with ableism.



A person's limitations and body are not the problem. It is a strength to know your own magic. If one cannot walk far or moves a certain way and that makes YOU uncomfortable, then that is your problem. It is a problem with how you have been taught to see humanity.

It is not only about ramps, interpreters, holding a bag or bringing medication; it's about meeting people where they are and moving with us, struggling with us without shaming, belittling, abusing, and resenting us. We will make mistakes on our way to being whole. Not whole as in unbroken, but whole as in complete—with our flaws, our hard truths, our complexities. We want a world that is whole and complex!

For us to move with one another, we must realize that able-bodied supremacy breeds racism, classism, and cissexism. The way we love, organize, make decisions, socialize, invite, give support, desire, and the way we see our gendered and raced bodies, all connect. Moving with one another is how we will transform not just the systems that harm us, but the systems that we allow to harm and invade our hearts and spirits. Liberation doesn't leave people behind. Liberation tries and transforms. Liberation shows up.

## CONCLUSION

Human bodies and minds come in a variety of forms and manifestations. The ways our identities intersect and overlap with other experiences of racialization, class, gender, body size, and other forms of difference are opportunities for celebration. As disabled and Deaf trans people, our experiences of gender and disability have been medicalized and pathologized; and yet we resist, fight back, redefine, reclaim, and re-remember. Society's construction of disability and gender intersects in our experiences of oppression and it is from this place that we are at our most powerful to fight back and resist marginalization.

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