

**Disability History Association Podcast**  
**Interview with Nancy Hansen**  
**November 2018**

**Caroline:** Hello and welcome to the Disability History Association Podcast. My name is Caroline Lieffers and it's my pleasure today to be talking to Nancy Hansen, Director of the Interdisciplinary Master's Program in Disability Studies at the University of Manitoba. Nancy recently co-edited the *Routledge History of Disability* with her colleagues Roy Hanes and Ivan Brown. And she's been very busy—she also co-edited the new collection *Untold Stories: A Canadian Disability History Reader* with Roy Hanes and Diane Driedger. It was published in 2018 by Canadian Scholars' Press. Nancy, thank you so much for joining me today.

**Nancy:** Thank you for inviting me. It's a pleasure to be here.

**Caroline:** Great! Well, you've done a lot of work in disability studies and disability activism over the course of your career, but since, you know, this is disability history podcast, I'll start by asking—how did you get interested in disability history?

**Nancy:** Actually that's a really good question because my original studies were in disability geography about space and place and time. But when I was first hired at the University of Manitoba I was successful in my application to an Einstein Fellowship with 13 other disabled academics from around the world. And we went to do a disability studies look at the T4 elimination sites for people with disabilities that took place during the Nazi period in Germany and in other parts of Europe. And I got to thinking when I came back what, what if any space is too much space—like disabled people taking up any space is too much space. And then I got to thinking, how can we regularize disability so that disabled people won't be seen as so much the other. And I thought, well a good place to start would be in spaces and places of culture like museums and art galleries because that's where the cultural elements that societies sort of, aspires to, or looks at, or thinks is valuable—that's where they're found.

So I got to thinking, OK, disability has always been present, so if we can fit it into places of culture and sort of uncover disability history or look at existing history through a disability lens, what can we uncover? And how can we make space for disabled people in places of culture?

**Caroline:** In this collection *Untold Stories*, your own contribution to this book talks about how disability history is publicly curated and memorialized, and you write “people with disabilities are engaged in a cultural reclamation project”—so making up for a long history of segregation, exclusion. Are they gaining ground in this project? How is it going so far?

**Nancy:** Well I would say it's moving. The fact that there has been recent publications around disability history, it points to that. Like Dustin Galer's book called *Working towards Equity*, the *Untold Stories* book, the Routledge book, and I believe Oxford has just come out with a disability history book as well, so it's gaining ground as far as the, you know, publications are concerned, slowly. I would say where there needs to be more work done is putting, like looking at existing museum collections and seeing what elements of disability can be put in there. And a lot of famous people, for example, have a disability as part of their life history, but that that part of their history is often subject to—if you will—cultural erasure. It's as if any recognition of a disability sort of detracts from the importance of what they've done in a historical context, where I think that that adds even more an element of interest and creativity.

**Caroline:** Do you think that museums are just inherently cautious institutions, and talking about disability almost requires them to take a political stance—it's going to require that they start talking

about disability rights? And that's seen as radical? Is that part of the problem here, the issue?

**Nancy:** I think, I think they're—any portion of the population that's been tagged as marginal or, like, anything around racialized issues, or gender issues, or sexuality issues, or Indigenous issues, and disability—and we're never just one thing—but anything that's, that has kind of uncomfortable history or past attached to it, there's sort of a discomfort level as to how do we approach this. But I think as disabled people become more involved with allies and disabled people themselves talking about their own history, and if we can regularize what's going on and sort of see the necessity of unpacking things and—not necessarily to make it more political or activist in nature—but just to get a more complete picture of what history really is, how we can see the richness and depth of the society in which we live and see it as a natural part of building a better historical picture, people will become less cautious of putting disability issues in the collection because they're already there, it's just that they haven't been unpacked yet.

**Caroline:** That's such a beautiful way of putting it. I really appreciate that. Why did you decide that the time was right for this Canadian collection, *Untold Stories*. What motivated you to do this?

**Nancy:** Well, we've been, Roy and Diane and I had been collecting—we wanted to do this for a long time and we were just looking for a publisher that was open to the idea and Canadian Scholars' Press seemed to be really really keen on the idea because they've done publishing around disability issues before and disability studies. So it was a natural place to go. And as disability studies grows as a discipline, other more shall we say established disciplines such as history have been looking at elements of disability history as well. So everything came together if you will. It was perfect timing. And being in Manitoba as well, there is a lot of disability history here that may have started here but it's grown on a national level, so there's sort of a lot of connections and intersections here as far as history is concerned. So everything just came together at the right time, and society is becoming more open to disability issues and this is just part of it.

**Caroline:** Yeah, that's great. I want to jump on that Manitoba thing quickly as a bit of a little digression but I think it's an interesting question. You're absolutely right, I mean, Manitoba really has been kind of a heartland for disability activism in Canada. You know, it's also where you happen to live and work. Why Manitoba? Is there something in the water there that's really motivated a lot of disability activism?

**Nancy:** Well the Mennonite Central—this is, this is what I have been given to understand—the Mennonite Central Committee did a lot of social justice issues around the world, and some of the early members of the disability rights community in Canada were Mennonite, and they just saw the social justice element as a natural part of what should be, you know, part of disability rights gathering if you will. And moving away from charity to social justice, just as the Mennonite community had with other issues of social justice in the past. Disability was just another one of those. So the early membership of the disability rights community is also, also had membership in the Mennonite social justice element projects.

**Caroline:** That makes a lot of sense. So this gets at one of the interesting issues that I think your book raises for people, and just purely by being this Canadian disability history reader, it asks us to interrogate what is distinctive about Canada's disability history. You've raised one really important element here with the history of the Mennonite community, particularly in Manitoba. Are there other things that are distinctive about disability history in Canada?

**Nancy:** I would say that one particular element of interest is the development of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms itself. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms was the first piece of legislation to—constitutional legislation—to include disability as a protected and protected element

and so that was unique in and of itself. There's the assumption a lot of times that the American—Americans with Disabilities Act was the first real piece of sort of constitution-like legislation to incorporate disability, but in my view I think it was the Charter. And also there has been sort of a, more of a willingness, at least in some sectors of Canadian society, to sort of see this multiculturalism as positive, diversity as positive. And disability being part of that diversity, it's just another element of depth and texture that's Canadian society. And there's a lot of work to do yet but we are getting there.

**Caroline:** Yeah, and for people who aren't familiar, the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms is a part of the Canadian constitution and it was passed into law in 1982. So that, yeah, definitely precedes the Americans with Disabilities Act, absolutely. Your collection also includes contributions that talk about institutions, like the Michener Centre in Red Deer; fights for access to public transit in Montreal and Manitoba; there's the habeas corpus case of Justin Clark and that actually happened in 1981 before the Charter of Rights and Freedoms enshrined disability rights in the Canadian constitution. That case is about, of course, a young adult man in Ontario who had to go to court to get the right to choose where he could live, right. So in your view what are some of the landmark moments or issues or flashpoints for disability history that we should be talking about?

**Nancy:** I think the case for transportation with the Via Rail case was an important one, too—getting, the process of getting disability enshrined in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms was a process in and of itself, and preceding that the Obstacles Report from the International Year of Disabled Persons was the first time that Canadian legislatures really got, got a flavor for the level of deprivation experienced by people with disabilities in this country caused by a lack of access to education, lack of access to employment, lack of access transportation and housing, lack of access period. And when one considers that disabled people of whatever type of disability you want to talk about constitute at least 15 percent of the population at any one time, that's a large segment of the population not to be aware of. So the Obstacles Report provided this, sort of, the foundation for what was to come after because nobody really understood what was happening with disabled people in this country. And there was a lot of isolation. That was before social media was available to a lot of people so people weren't really aware of—disabled people really weren't aware of other disabled people's situations because there was a level of isolation present too.

**Caroline:** So it could act almost like as a gathering point for people with disabilities themselves in Canada. That's really interesting. Would you mind, if you happen to be comfortable talking about it, would you mind just going over the Via Rail case that you mentioned for people who aren't familiar with it?

**Nancy:** I'm not an expert on it but the principal drivers in it were the Council of Canadians with Disabilities and it was—Via Rail had purchased some train cars that were not accessible to wheelchair users and the Council of Canadians with Disabilities said this was inappropriate because disabled people needed accessible transportation across the country. And Via Rail was trying to make the case that this was not financially feasible for them to do so. And the case went all the way to the Supreme Court. I'm sorry I don't have the details right hand but it was groundbreaking and it really put the Council of Canadians with Disabilities on the map as far as disability rights is concerned.

**Caroline:** That's excellent, it's the kind of thing that, I agree, we as Canadians should be talking about more, you know. Absolutely, so important. So actually this gets at a question that I wanted to ask you about more. I mean, we talked at the beginning of this conversation about this cultural reclamation project and the need to put disability front and center in museums and include it in stories that we might not conventionally think of as being about disability, but, you know, as you

peel back the layers you often find that disability is a very important part of, of rounding out this picture, right? So I want to ask in particular about Canada. We're both Canadian. Do you think that Canada is doing a good job of this right now? Are there any examples you can talk about?

**Nancy:** I think Canada is starting to do a good job with it. I think there's a lot of work—let's put it this way—it's a work in progress, right?

**Caroline:** Yeah.

**Nancy:** And I think there's a lot of work yet to do. I know that Ryerson—the *Out from Under* project was instrumental in, in taking what was initially an undergraduate student project and turning it into an exhibit—the first disability history in Canada and it was originally situated in a multicultural center outside of Toronto, and then it was moved to the Royal Ontario Museum and then it ultimately found its home in the Canadian Museum for Human Rights. So that, that was really important.

I know that there has been efforts to make existing exhibits more accessible to disabled users. But I think we have to get—for the most part a lot of how disability at the museum or at the art gallery—wherever they are, is approached is, “Yes we have an accessible toilet and our restaurant facilities are accessible and there are, there are, you know, seats located throughout the facility,” whatever. Although I have to say that there are efforts now to have touch, touch tours for exhibits for people with vision impairments. There are different specialized tours for looking at elements of disability in art, but those, those are exceptional, I would say, rather than a regularized part of going to the museum, or looking at, looking at what museum collections have, or art galleries have. I think we have to get beyond the discomfort factor around disability issues to really move that forward and—just expecting disability, and putting disability in part of the history curriculum wherever you find yourself—as part of the regular school system, starting from elementary through secondary to post-secondary. Just expect disability and incorporate disability issues into the larger history project, if you will, and not hive it off as something special or unique. I think one should just learn to expect disability.

**Caroline:** Yeah. Yeah. Well, as you said, what, 15 percent of the Canadian population, right? How, how does it make sense to hive that off, right?

**Nancy:** And, like if you want to go worldwide it's over 1 billion people. There is a lot of richness of life there. You can't ignore that and understand the fullness of the human condition, if you will.

**Caroline:** Well, you call your book *Untold Stories*, right? Why? Why is it so important for everyone to read these stories and go to these museums and learn about this in school and learn about disability history? I think I know the answer, but I want you to talk about why you're so passionate about this.

**Nancy:** Oh, well, first and foremost, as a disabled person I think we need a more complete history of disabled people's presence in, in the historical landscape and that disability has always been present. But we have to sort of build another approach that moves beyond cultural absence to, beyond charity, to disabled people living their lives in Canadian society. And moving towards human rights and activism, so that we can sort of take our place—our natural place in Canadian history and the larger history project.

**Caroline:** I really love your point, too—I think this is so important—that we need to know the history to ensure that we continue to be good activists, right?

**Nancy:** Exactly.

**Caroline:** It's a part of that project, right, as you realize just how much work needs to be done—you realize what past injustices need to be remedied, right? And history gives you that—it kind of lights that fire, right?

**Nancy:** Exactly.

**Caroline:** I think that's a piece of it, yeah. I want to talk a bit about academia. The public. I mean, museums in a way are kind of that space that bridges the gap—one possible space that bridges the gap between academia and the public. Because I, I do think that there's quite a lot of momentum happening in terms of disability history in academia, which is really exciting. But are we as disability historians including the public enough in our work? Either as possible audiences for our work, or, you know, especially people with disabilities out there in the public, as possible collaborators in our work, right? So what can scholars like me do to kind of bridge that gap? Like, do we need to be organizing different kinds of conferences? Do we need to publish in different venues? I mean, I want to know your thoughts about this.

**Nancy:** Well, I think first and foremost we have to see disability everywhere, and recognize that history is everywhere, and look for the historical content. I realize you're a historian yourself, but look for the historical content in everything that one does. And I think in the larger context we can't understand the level of marginalization experienced by disabled people today until we have a full grasp of the history. And I think we have to, we have to start collecting histories, like oral histories, visible histories, because a lot of disability rights-based groups or disability groups in general are so busy trying to exist day-to-day and in an atmosphere of cutback threats and just the day-to-day survival of these organizations is tough, and they don't have time to do, you know, the history of how they got there and what they're doing and all that stuff. I think it's incumbent upon us as, as disability historians and academics in general even if, even if history is not a part of your discipline *per se* history is everywhere just as disability is and we have to incorporate that and find ways of putting it in, to build—to make a more complete context of what's actually going on here.

**Caroline:** Yeah, yeah absolutely. And I really appreciate your point of recognizing that a lot of advocacy and activist groups are really really busy, and so being able to produce history that is useful to them, you know, and just sort of make that available out there, so that they can draw on it is, really, could be really helpful, right.

**Nancy:** Exactly.

**Caroline:** Yeah, I love that. It's actually something I hadn't really thought that much about, and so I really appreciate you bringing that to my attention. That's great.

I have just a couple final questions for you, if you don't mind. One of them is about disciplines and interdisciplinarity. So you're obviously the director of an interdisciplinary master's program in disability studies. And this wonderful collection *Untold Stories* includes contributions from people from all over the disciplinary spectrum. I mean, you've got sociologists, you've got activists, you've got geographers, you've got museologists, you've got a fair share of historians in there, and there's more—like the list goes on. So can you tell me a little bit about the advantages of taking that kind of interdisciplinary approach?

**Nancy:** You get a fresh perspective on everything, right? Everybody brings something to the table and they all perceive it differently. So, and it's just—you get you get more than if you would, say looking, taking a traditional approach to something, whatever that means these days. But if you

look at something from different angles, you know, it provides an element that you might have—might not have considered before or even recognize it was there. And I just think it's really interesting to do that. And, and to recognize that you can find richness everywhere, and that—it's not, history is not just the, it doesn't just belong to historians, if you will. There's history in everything. And even if, even if your discipline isn't necessarily historical, there's history within it

**Caroline:** Yeah, yeah history doesn't just belong to historians. That's really well put. So Nancy, one final question. What other projects are you involved in right now? I mean what's coming next for you?

**Nancy:** Well I'm working on another book.

**Caroline:** Wow. That's great.

**Nancy:** It's still in the developmental stages. But again, it's an interdisciplinary approach to disability issues. And history is one of them as well, and it looks at history in different contexts on a worldwide basis, so I'm doing that. I'm also looking at the realities of being a disabled academic in the academy and the interesting situations one finds oneself in as a result of that.

**Caroline:** Oh my!

**Nancy:** And as you can see I'm rather interdisciplinary in the way I approach the work that I'm doing.

**Caroline:** Yeah, absolutely. Do you mind if I actually ask a little bit more about that issue—the realities of being a disabled academic? I'm really interested in what your experiences have been.

**Nancy:** Well, it's never boring. [Both laugh] I always feel kind of chronically unexpected. So, and one has to be very creative in an environment where, where one's presence is often not, not expected and the creativity that one has to use on a day-to-day basis in the way that one does research and just in the way that one teaches one's classes. I mean, it's never boring and it gives you a chance to be unceasingly creative in the way that you approach things. [Both laugh]

**Caroline:** I can't wait for this project, because I can't wait to read your perspectives on things. And I'm sure you have some really good stories. [Both laugh]

**Nancy:** There are a few.

**Caroline:** We'll save them for the book. Nancy, thank you so much for your time. It's so kind of you—I know you're incredibly busy so, so kind of you to take this time to talk to me. Really enjoyed our conversation today.

**Nancy:** Thank you for asking me, and it's been a real pleasure.

**Caroline:** Wonderful, thank you so much.