

Disability History Association Podcast
Interview with Liz Jackson and Natalie Wright
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Caroline Lieffers: Hello, and welcome to another episode of the Disability History Association Podcast. My name is Caroline Lieffers and it's my pleasure to be talking with Natalie Wright and Liz Jackson. Natalie and Liz, thank you both so much for joining me today.

I usually introduce my guests, but I was finding it really hard to summarize all that both of you do. So I'm going to pass the work on to you and make you introduce yourselves. So can you just tell me, or tell our audience, a little bit about yourselves?

Liz Jackson: My name is Liz Jackson. I am a disability advocate, turned, I guess, design strategist at this point. It's not necessarily the easiest thing to try and articulate. I'm the founder of an organization called The Disabled List. I work with Alex Haagaard, who is also based in Canada. And what we do is we engage in disability as a creative practice. And so instead of seeing disability as something that needs to be smoothed out or fixed, we just kind of wonder how can you engage creatively with it? And through The Disabled List, we operate a website called Critical Axis, which is, it's a repository and a database of disability representation in media. And I have a feeling we might get into some of this stuff later. But yeah, you know, I just, I'm always kind of looking for fun and interesting projects in the disability space around, you know, design and media. And that's really why we're here today.

Caroline: Excellent. Thanks. What about you, Natalie?

Natalie Wright: Well, I just first wanted to thank you, Caroline, for this opportunity to be on the Disability History Association Podcast. It's been such an incredible resource for me. And I'm so grateful to you and others who run the Disability History Association. Like you, I'm also Canadian. I grew up half in Ottawa and half in London, England. I attended the University of Toronto for my BA and then went on to do my masters at the Winterthur program in American material culture. And then after that, I had this really great experience as a curatorial fellow at the Chipstone Foundation in Milwaukee, Wisconsin which, apart from having a really incredible collection of early American furniture and British ceramics, is also this incubator of, of new ideas in the museum and curatorial world. And then from there, I just started last September, a PhD program in Design History at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. So I'm very happy to be a student again.

Caroline: Naturally, I always sort of drift to the question, how did you get interested in disability, or in this case, maybe the intersections between disability and design?

Liz: So I, you know, I, it's interesting, as I get more and more into this space, I work very hard to kind of avoid my origin story. But I figure this is a safe disability space, so I don't mind. I got sick on March 30th of 2012. When I got out of the hospital, I needed eyeglasses and a cane. And so for me, the question became why I had so much choice with my eyeglasses, but none with my cane. And that was, and I think it really is the existential question that's really come to kind of define my life. Because for me, it's a question about when you can and can't choose your identity. And what are the factors at play that may prevent you from having full autonomy over the way

your body and mind are perceived in the world. And so, yeah, so it's been, in a couple of weeks, it'll have been eight years that I've been engaged rigorously in this area, and love it.

Caroline: Thank you. What about you, Natalie?

Natalie: Well, I think for as long as I can remember, I was always really interested in working with objects and artifacts and have worked in museums since I was in high school. I think I even wrote a lot of my high school essays about displays that I saw. So I've always been a really big museum nerd, and I've always been really drawn to this field of material culture studies and the power of objects as historical sources. And I think for, during both my undergrad and master's degrees, I would say that I wrote a lot about connections between the material world and the body, but that I didn't necessarily relate that to disability studies, which now I find funny because my brother has cerebral palsy and being part of the disability family community has shaped me so much. But, so it was, when I was at the Chipstone Foundation that I first began really focusing on disability in my research and curatorial work. And that prompted me to look back and see that a lot of my previous work was actually about disability. And then that kind of revelation, or at least it felt revelatory, pushed me back to, to apply to go back to school, because I felt like I really wanted to work within this framework, and in order to do that, I needed some of the theoretical scaffolding. But I will say that it's, it's also been interesting, I think, to consider that my work is now being thought of as within, like, histories of design. I mean, I'm in a design history program. But I was previously working within material culture methodologies or studying the decorative arts. And so, and I feel like now that I'm working on disability, it's, it's talked about more in the realm of design. So I'm still sort of understanding that shift of, sort of, what it means to be working in the field of disability design.

Caroline: There are so many things that I'd love to talk to both of you about, but I, of course, want to just hone right in on the thing that you two collaborated on most recently, which is this exhibit that you have on display at the Milwaukee Art Museum called "Functional Fashions." What's Functional Fashions? Tell me about this line of clothing that you have on display.

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Natalie: So what I always try and get across to people on a basic level, that, is that I think Functional Fashions was this really incredible moment in disability fashion history. So if people take anything away, it's that, it's that, for me at least. It started at Dr. Howard Rusk's Institute for Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, which I know listeners will have heard about in some of the other episodes, which he established after World War II in order to apply rehabilitation practices that he used with veterans, but instead on American civilians at the Institute. So the designer, Helen Cookman, spent a three-year research residency at the Institute between around 1952 to 1955 to look into what they called "clothing problems of the handicapped."

And this intersection of rehabilitation and Cookman's career is really interesting to me because Cookman was already in her 60s at that point and she had, she had established herself as a, as a creator of workwear. This is, I think, what she's best known for now. And a lot of her uniforms are at the Metropolitan Museum's Costume Institute. And one of the main goals for rehabilitation at that time, in my understanding, was employment. And even the funding for Cookman's research came from the US Office of Vocational Rehabilitation. So it was this goal of imagining what patients could wear to work after they left the Institute that Cookman collaborated

with an occupational therapist on both a pilot line of clothing and this incredible 80, 80 page book called *Functional Fashions for the Physically Handicapped*.

And so I think that with her background in workwear, she was sort of uniquely qualified to do this, and I'll explain a little bit more about the line, but I would also love for Liz to, to talk about some of the other reasons that, that Cookman was really the, just a perfect choice for this line.

So her pilot line included both menswear and womenswear. Interestingly, not children's wear, but [**Liz:** Well, not until later, yeah] Yeah, exactly. And that, so it included like trousers with zippers down each side and an interior belt that, that would hold them up as well as women's jackets with reinforced underarms for crutch users. And what they called action pleats - and I love that word - that allowed sort of greater arm and shoulder movement for the wearer.

What happened next, I think, is a little bit uncertain. Newspaper reports say that between like thirty thousand, thirty thousand and fifty thousand individuals and organizations wrote in to request information on the line. But neither Liz nor I have found any of this correspondence, which certainly means, it doesn't mean that it didn't happen, certainly. But we could maybe generalize to say that there was widespread excitement about the line and its availability.

So at that point, I think Cookman firmly believed that designing accessible and beautiful clothes filled a need and, and really also presented a business opportunity. So then she approached the *New York Times* Style Editor, Virginia Pope. And together they founded this nonprofit organization called the Clothing Research and Development Foundation to run Functional Fashions.

And then they did something really interesting, I think. They expanded the line not only by creating a mail-order catalog for Cookman's designs, but they also approached other designers to incorporate Cookman's construction features into their own, into their own pieces, as well as identifying pieces that they already deemed functional that were on the market. So it was sort of like a three-pronged approach. And then they identified all of those garments by adding a Functional Fashions tag. So between 1955 to 1976, we found at least 30 designers who contributed to the line and they ranged from higher-end sportswear labels like Pauline Trigere and Vera Maxwell, and even one of the designers for Lacoste, to everyday brands like Levi's that we still recognize today.

And they also showed at New York Fashion Week. I haven't found images or videos of that, but I'm hoping, hoping to at some point. And the board of their nonprofit became quite large and had, I would say, important people in the industry, including the chairman of Bergdorf Goodman.

But again, so another thing that was really interesting was that despite all of this and many of their successes, I would say that their main challenge was getting the clothing to be stocked in department stores. At one point in time, Functional Fashions was going to be featured in the Sears Roebuck catalog. But it, in the end, it only received sort of a small write up with no images and it was in the medical supply section. And so I think, I just think that example is so poignant because their, one of their goals was really to disseminate these pieces as fashion. And I think that they, despite all of their best efforts, had difficulty with that. Yeah. Liz, did you want to say more about, about the history of the line and Helen Cookman?

Liz: Yeah, I think for, for me to kind of elaborate on why, you know, I'm involved and why this was so particularly interesting to me, I think we need to kind of hone in on the relationship between Helen Cookman and this woman named Virginia Pope, who Natalie said was the fashion stylist for the *New York Times*. So the interesting thing is, is when Howard Rusk decided that he wanted to, to create these, these garments, right? The moment that he did that, he didn't reach out to Helen Cookman, right? The, the person that he reached out to was Virginia Pope, right? The *New York Times*. And as soon as he reached out to Virginia Pope, the interesting thing was, is Virginia said, "oh, you need to talk to Helen Cookman," right? And so why did Virginia think that Howard Rusk needed to talk to Helen Cookman? Well, if you look at Helen's background, as Natalie said, right, she had this, this, this history of developing these garments in the 1930s or so that were wildly functional. But the thing is, and this is really, I think, to me, the key point is, is that as the 1940s and 1950s rolled around, she had begun to age into disability. So she had started losing her hearing. And so what happened was, is Helen would design garments - because at the time hearing aids had these big batteries that resided along the waist - and so Helen started designing her own garments that would incorporate the hearing aid battery, you know, into the outfit. And so for me, the thing that I'm so interested in is, I think that Helen, because of that, became the obvious choice to Virginia Pope. And that's how she ended up in this situation. And so the fact that Virginia's logic was to turn to Helen is something I wish I could better understand. I don't necessarily think that's something that brands do right now. I think brands tend to turn to nondisabled saviors. So why was that Virginia's instinct? You know, I just, I'm trying to figure that out.

Caroline: Why did you think it was important to put this collection on display?

Natalie: I think, what we, what Liz and I both found was that there are so many news articles that, that many of us have encountered, that, that repeat a very similar narrative that, that clothing for disabled individuals has never existed before, that it's this very large market that, that the fashion industry has not tapped into, and that, that basically this, this history does not exist, if we were reading between the lines. And, and so it was, on a basic level, it was, it was important for us to, to display the line in order to correct some of those assumptions. But as Liz said, too, you know, the importance of Cookman's own disability also gets us away from this narrative of designing for individuals and instead really elevates us to, I think, a more, a more, a more rigorous form of design, which is designing by individuals and then designing with.

Liz: Yeah, so yeah. I mean, for me through this process I've developed this, this term that I feel like is, is so prevalent in disability. And it's, it's sort of a playful term. I call it "first-person language." And it's a play on a person-first language. So do I need to get into person-first or is this a fairly savvy audience?

Caroline: I think it's a fairly savvy audience but you could give a little primer just in case, you never know.

Liz: OK. So, person-first language is a person with disability. It's somebody who doesn't want to be defined by their disability. I, on the other hand, identify as a disabled person, and I see my power as being part of a collective whole. So, you know, there's this dynamic that's happening in disability right now where if, if you use identity-first language, you might get corrected by people that use person-first language. But if you use person-first language, nobody with identity-first language is actually going to correct you. So there's just, it's just this strange back and forth. And

so I saw it as an opportunity to get a little bit playful. So the term I came up with was "first-person language." And this is something that happens a lot in design where a person makes a thing, and then the newspaper says, "finally," even though the thing has existed in the disability space for eons. A really good example of that is Lego came out with Braille bricks. It was these Legos that were Braille, and they praised it as innovation. Didn't acknowledge the fact that Tack-Tiles that's been around since the 1980s, right, and this is a product of the disability community. And so for me and for Natalie, the thing that we started seeing was, is every maybe 10, 20 years, another fashion designer would come along and say, "I'm the first." You know, I think the one that really stands out to us is Mindy Scheier of Runway of Dreams, partner with Tommy Hilfiger. She wrote an op-ed for *Time Magazine* back in 2016 and then did a talk at TED about how she was the first. And Helen clearly shows us no, right, not the first. And so this idea of first-person language is just this way to kind of push back on these dynamics. And I do hope that this is something that Helen can allow for in the disability space, is these more complex conversations about where things originate, because it is, it is easy. And there was a time where I said, like, Helen's the first, but she's actually not, right? Because before her were all the ways in which disabled people hacked. And so we need to kind of start accounting for that as well. And so first-person language, through Helen Cookman, I'm hoping we can start to have some of these conversations.

Natalie: Yeah, and I would just add to that, I totally agree. And I think what was really helpful for us was that we could use the Functional Fashions research and the display in order to open up a broader conversation about, about this very long history of, of dress and disability, as opposed to us saying that that Cookman and her collaborators were the first. And it's been really interesting to me, at least in the past couple of months, what's come up a lot is how individuals who are working in home economics programs in the United States and in Canada as well, were working on, were working on clothing designs for disability, you know, prior to the Functional Fashions line. Certainly on a smaller scale, but they were, in a sense, also modeling a lot of the methodologies that Cookman and some of the occupational therapists were, were using in terms of working with patients and then trying to measure out a lot of their, a lot of their clothing problems and to do some of this, like, mathematical analyses. It's really interesting to see how some of those methodologies, it seems like, were, were started in a lot of these home economics programs, which were also engaging with some the vocational rehabilitation work that the US government was promoting.

Caroline: Do you mind if I just ask, what do you mean when you say like mathematical analyses?

Natalie: Oh, sure. There, in the in the book in particular, *Functional Functions for the Physically Handicapped*, the end of the book goes into all of these different tables and graphs of measuring out individuals' clothing problems. So they're, I think that they were tallying a lot of the different, a lot of the different, both I would say, sort of, complaints and then wishes for clothing, and then trying to measure those out. So they would sort of say like, well, 50 percent of people have difficulty with socks, and then 30 percent of people have difficulty with shoes. And so they were trying to figure out what they would, how they would approach their designs, based on that.

Caroline: Interesting. OK, OK. So tell me how your collaboration started. How did you two end up working together on this particular Functional Fashions project?

Liz: So I have a friend named Lawrence Carter-Long who's, I'm sure a lot of your, your podcast listeners will know who he is. He does this thing where he goes on eBay and he types in the word "disability." And then he just like, buys shit, like. And so I got home one day and there was a package waiting for me. And I opened it up and it was the *Functional Fashions for the Physically Handicapped* book. And I just started kind of poring through it and just fell in love with Helen Cookman. I was just like, who is this woman? I live in New York City. I realized that this book was created in New York. I just was determined to figure out what had happened to her. So eventually what I managed to do is track down her two grandsons. And her one grandson lives here in New York. And I just reached out to him. He's like, why don't you come over? So I went over and we chatted for a while and he said, you need to know Natalie Wright. And I was like, who is Natalie? And so there was this person at Chipstone that had also reached out. You had reached out to him, right? Yeah. And so had also reached out to him. And so I don't know if I e-mailed or called Natalie, but, you know, we just got on the phone one day and, and just, it was, it was the best. It was the best.

Natalie: Yeah, and on my side of things, I, I was working on an exhibit that was at the Museum of Wisconsin Art about a childrenswear clothing designer named Florence Eiseman. And this was back when Google still had the historic newspapers feature where you could search their digitized archive, archival newspaper collection. And when I typed in Florence Eiseman into that feature several years ago, one of the first articles that came up was from the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, and it was about her collaboration with Helen Cookman on *Functional Fashions for children*. And so then that was sort of my research for that exhibit. We, we put together a catalog, and so my catalog essay was about that. And then I quickly realized that Florence Eiseman was one of one of many, yeah, one of many of Cookman's collaborators. And so I sort of knew at that point in time that the project would hopefully expand. And it was really, it was such wonderful timing. I think right around that period, it was when Liz called me at work and, and yeah, it was just an amazing phone call because she just basically said, I'm also working on *Functional Fashions*. And, you know, we are, so, our collaboration sort of started in the archive. So I think some of the other archivists, too, were sort of saying like, oh, you, there are two people who must be working together because they're looking at the exact same really specific sources.

Liz: Yeah, I think, yeah. I think the funny thing, too, is, is like Natalie is very precise and like such an academic and a researcher, and like, me, like I am a terrible student, like I could never go back to school. I don't even know how to research, right? So I'm like flailing about. And it's just, it's funny like, that there's these sort of two, kind of vastly different approaches that have gone into this. And I think for me, because I don't look at it from this kind of academic framework, like, it, to me, it feels like a murder mystery. Like, I almost like want to create like a podcast or a documentary called "Where Are the *Functional Fashions*?" right, that talks about, right, not just, you know, where, where are these comments, right? Because it is a mystery. But also, you know, this idea of *Functional Fashions* and, and this first-person language and all the dynamics that play into it, that I think allow them to stay missing, I think is so vitally important. But yeah, I think the thing that really, besides Natalie, the thing that really keeps me going in this is, I'm, and I, again, I'm not a researcher, so like, I don't understand the dynamics at play, but just my non-research logic, like, I'm convinced that these archives exist somewhere in their entirety because they're not showing up anywhere. Like, how can a whole archive go missing when Helen's earlier work didn't go missing? And so it's just like, it's like, when are we going to find the Holy Grail? Like, it's just, you know, I'm convinced it has to be somewhere.

Caroline: Yeah. It's in someone's basement or something. And you're just waiting for them to emerge and say, "oh, I've had it the whole time!"

Liz: Yeah. And then like, it'll be like dusty and we like blow it off and then like, the lid creaks open and like, yeah. And then there's like, like angels start singing.

Caroline: I can't wait. [Laughs] Hopefully this podcast will help you find that person out there who knows where this archive is. You never know. But, I, I can't make it to Milwaukee in person to see this thing. So can you tell me about some of the objects on display? What's it like to go through this exhibit?

Natalie: Yeah, I think, well, maybe the first thing that individuals would see is this fairly large image of a model wearing, wearing one of Helen Cookman's suits and he's holding, he's using crutches in the image. But it's this very striking black and white photo of a model who is, is quite dashing, I would say. And he sort of has his head turned to the side, and so we can see the profile of his face. And he's wearing a suit that's called a shortcut suit, that was sort of the playful name that they had come up with for it. And the photo, I think, was from 1958 and the model's name was Cye Perkins. We actually know quite a lot about him. He was a model for, for a little while and he is also a model for pieces in the *Functional Fashions for the Physically Handicapped* book. And the shortcut suit, they essentially created a suit with, with a shorter jacket for men, for wheelchair users in order to be able to sit down and for the, for the fabric, extra fabric not to be bunched up uncomfortably. Which is, again, one of these sort of construction solutions that we would recognize today as being part of what's now more mainstreamly called adaptive clothing. And so that's sort of the first image that individuals see. And the model Cye Perkins is kind of looking at an Eames splint on the wall. And so the, the Charles and Ray Eames leg splint was actually displayed in the, in the galleries and we sort of borrowed it and then reframed it in this, in this installation, which I liked a lot, because it's, that object I think is often thought of as an important piece in design history as it is, in terms of like molded plywood. But it's, in some cases its original intent gets a little bit lost in, in that design narrative because it was originally used as a kind of stabilizer for veterans' legs in, in World War II. And Cye Perkins, the model, we know, was, was in World War II and served. But, I don't think that he was necessarily injured, but he was certainly part of the age group at that point in time of individuals who were coming back.

And we wanted to use the Eames Splint as a way of kind of calling out the history of rehabilitation in the United States. And below the Eames Splint is a case, a document case. And right below the Splint is Howard Rusk's book, *Living with a Disability*. And it's turned to a page that has some of the Self-Help designs in it, which is the shop that Muriel Zimmerman created or ran at the Institute, where, where patients would, would think through and create their own, their own designs. And there's a lot of really interesting graphic design in that book in terms of laying out a lot of these, sort of utensils and implements, and various, kind of, gadgets.

And then the rest of the document case sort of looks at a lot of the pieces that we were able to find, both borrowing from institutions, and to be honest, a number of pieces that we found on eBay. So like the photograph of Cye Perkins, for example, is something that I purchased on eBay. And so, as Liz said, we're still trying to amass this or, you know, find pieces and then bring them together, once again, that have you know, gone their separate ways over the, over a fairly long period of time. So, the rest of the case is some of Helen Cookman's patents that she filed for. There was a 1960 patent, *Trousers for a Handicapped Person*, which is that design that I mentioned earlier, where there are the zippers going down each trouser leg and the

interior belt, which was the basis for her last collaboration before she passed away, with Levi's, the Levi's Functional Fashions Jeans. And so next to that patent, we have a *Levi's Letter* magazine, which was almost like their internal company magazine from 1975 announcing the release of, of these jeans. And then we also have the, the mail-order pamphlet of Cookman's designs from the Functional Fashions line which, which we borrowed from another museum.

And I would say that too the overall design of the installation is, the design language is taken from the *Functional Fashions for the Physically Handicapped* book. It's, it has really wonderful illustrations in it and the typography is really fantastic. And so we, it was very easy to kind of take inspiration from that.

And then if visitors turn around from, from that document case, then they could look at a number of garments that are facing the document case. And so there are three, there are three ensembles in the display and they kind of span the Functional Fashions timeline. There's an early 1957 Bonnie Cashin piece that was not actually designed for the Functional Fashions line, but it was part of the series of garments that Functional Fashions would identify as being already functional for users. And so it's this really elegant mohair skirt and it has a matching scarf and it's a variety of different colors in plaid and it's really, it's really, really striking. And what she did was that she used these kind of clips that are usually referred to as like industrial hardware in order to hitch up the front of the skirt so that users wouldn't have to pull up their skirt.

And then, the middle of the, so next to the Bonnie Cashin piece, is one of the Florence Eiseman dresses that we had on display in the Florence Eiseman exhibit. And that's an interesting piece. It's, it's really an A-line dress that just has one button on each shoulder to make it easier for children to dress and undress themselves. And that piece was created in 1963, right around the time when so many discussions were happening around polio in the United States. And so the Bonnie Cashin piece is really about mobility, and then the Florence Eiseman piece is about children, childrenswear and polio. And for that Florence Eiseman piece, the A-line dress was considered an adaptive feature at that point in time because it didn't have a waist, so, so children could put the dress on and take it off more easily. And the quality of the fabric is really high and could be more easily washed.

And then the last piece is from the 70s. It's a Vera Maxwell dress that was called a speed suit. And it was made of Lycra. And it, that one is interesting because the Lycra was being used to take away all fastenings, so that you could basically slip it on over your head and then you wouldn't have to deal with any buttons or anything. And there were, I think, in the Functional Fashions line, there were a lot of different ways that they tried to think of getting rid of fastenings, using much longer zippers instead or, or just using Velcro, which was invented right around that period of time, too, that they called pressure tape. And there are some really interesting videos where a lot of individuals have to sort of explain that, like, the ripping sounds that you hear from this pressure tape is, is OK. Like that's what you're meant, that's what it's meant to do. But so with this Vera Maxwell dress, the way that the designer, Vera Maxwell, thought of it was as being really useful for individuals with arthritis. And Vera Maxwell, I just, I really wanted to include a piece of hers in the, in the display because she was such a longtime contributor to the Functional Fashions line. And one of her pieces is just really incredible. I haven't found an example of this in real life yet, but she designed what was called a Rugby Suit in, in the early 1960s that was this, this jacket with a Velcro closure for women. And then it had a matching longer skirt, as well as what they called a black robe or a wheelchair robe. And everything was lined with fur.

And I think that it was black seal fur. So it was, it would have been very, very fancy. And so I really, I wanted to include something with Vera Maxwell, because she was such an important contributor to the line. But it ended up working out that we had the three garments represent sort of the 10-year or 20-year span, a piece from the 50s and 60s and 70s. And that's one thing that I really find fascinating about the line is that it, as historians, we can kind of track the change over that 20-year span of disability culture in the United States.

Liz: Yeah, I think like one of the things that feels so important to me and, and I sort of can't praise Natalie enough for this, is I feel like this exhibit actually tells a story where, and especially in the United States right now, where other disability exhibits are becoming the story, which has been a source of great distress for me. You know, you could point to Cooper-Hewitt's *Access+Ability* where, you know, you could actually go through the exhibit and not even know that disabled people exist. And I think, really, like in some ways, Natalie managed to kind of make a couple of statements. One of the main statements is, is this, it's in the exhibit as well, I think, but it's on the blog posts about it. Natalie says that we don't know how Helen identified: was she person-first? Was she identity-first? And so instead, what the exhibit does is it takes on the identity of the collaborators. And so it actually uses identity-first language, because that was, as a key collaborator, that's how I identified. And so for me, it's, the exhibit just makes me really hopeful that there are going to be opportunities and ways to do things in large-scale institutions moving forward that are more complex and, and tell really specific stories and open the door for much larger conversations.

Natalie: And I forgot to say that there's also, there are a couple of digital components of the show. The *Functional Fashions for the Physically Handicapped* book is there on display in the document case. But then, on an iPad, visitors can sort of, can flip through the digitized version of it, which I really, I'm so happy that we could do that, because I think what you get a sense of is that 80 pages is quite long and the specificity of the book is really impressive, especially as they get into later chapters of what fabrics they're choosing and how much, like, textile science goes into this is really, really interesting to me. And then there is also a television special that shows individuals showing off all of these different construction features that were, that made the garments accessible. So you can actually, you can sort of see what some of the other *Functional Fashions* garments look like on bodies and, and how individuals were sort of explaining them to a wider audience.

Caroline: Hmm, that's really interesting. Another issue that I wanted to ask the two of you about is accessibility. So how did you design this exhibit so that it was for everybody, or is that even the right way of thinking about your work and about spaces like this? Right? And then following up from that, I'm also curious about what the reaction or the response to this exhibit has been in your communities.

Natalie: I think one important part was certainly what Liz said about choosing to use identity-first language, and that resulted in a lot of interesting conversations with the, with the museum itself. I'm very grateful that they were receptive to us doing that because in their, sort of, guidelines for museum language or the museum voice, I think that they've been trained to, to use person-first as sort of the most neutral or accessible, or, not accessible, but yeah, the most neutral, the most neutral language. So, you know, we had lots of conversations with, between Liz and I, and then also with Bess Williamson, the disability design historian down at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, about what a identity-first exhibit might look like and might sound like. And so that, I think, was, it was just a really wonderful - it felt like an

experiment to, to think through. And, and we were, I think we were quite happy with, with the reception that that received. I think at least a number of people online were excited about, excited about this and how that really changes the tone and the feeling of the exhibit. And I think that even though collaboration is becoming more, more mainstream in, in curatorial practice, I think that a lot of people reacted well to, to the collaboration that Liz and I entered into in order to create the Functional Fashions exhibit in that - in particular that Liz was brought in, as, you know, I hope, as, as an equal collaborator as opposed to just bringing in someone as a voice to say like, "OK, yes, check, this is all, this is all, makes sense and it's neutral. And I as someone from the disability community says that this is OK."

Liz: Yeah, and I sort of, so one of the key phrases you said, Caroline, is this idea of make it for everybody. And it's actually something that I really struggle with, because literally the notion that something is for everybody is oftentimes a thing that creates disability. And so there is, there was at no point when Natalie and I were going through this process that I ever wanted it to be for everybody. Instead of making something for a subset of people, trying, we're trying to reach a subset of people, right? Like we're trying to get you and your listeners interested. That's what's important to us. And so, you know, I can imagine that there are people that kind of wander by this exhibit and it doesn't have much of an impact on them. And maybe it's not supposed to. But then again, you know, I don't necessarily know that Helen was trying to make things for everybody as well. And so, you know, in some ways, this idea of for everybody, it becomes sort of virtue signaling or code for disability in a way that I find to be really destructive. And I hope in some ways that doing this the way that Natalie and I are doing this, that we can push back on that a little bit, so.

Caroline: Thank you. That's a really important corrective. And I so appreciate that, yeah.

Liz: Yeah, I mean, the most I can say is this is really, really important to me. And it's really important to Natalie. And, you know, maybe it might become really important to a few other people. And like, that's, that's literally like all that matters to me.

Caroline: Do you want to say more about that? I mean, maybe, is this a question about, sort of, the problems with universal design in general?

Liz: Yeah. You know, I. At The Disabled List, we approach disability and design from a cultural perspective. What we oftentimes say is that it's the defining of the problem that is actually the problem. And so what happens is we have all these misnomers and these sort of phrases that we can sort of espouse that make people feel really good. But what those phrases I think ultimately do is they serve to prevent people from thinking more deeply about this stuff. And, right, like, I think about what is my, what's the thing that I get hung up on in all of this? It is that moment that Rusk approached Virginia Pope, and Virginia thought of Helen, right? Like, there is so much to that, right? It is so rich in a disability culture of that time and of, of sort of, the beliefs at the time of the knowledge that disabled stakeholders had. And, just, in that one, you know, like I get lost in that. And so, you know, I, I think we exist in this space where you say design for one and everybody benefits, you erase the disabled person. But through all of it, you never get to delve more complexly in it. And so, so or me, I just, I don't want, what Helen did, what she represents, but also the curatorial work that Natalie is doing, like, I don't want that to get simplified. And by saying something like designed for all or that we're trying to reach everybody, that's, that's the thing that we risk happening. And it would be a mistake. It's, I think it's, it's the mistake that every other exhibit has made. And it's just, we have this little,

there's, it's just this little niche space in the world. It's this little teeny tiny spot that this woman crammed her way into. And, you know, through her, maybe we can do something a little differently. Like, that's all. That's all this is.

Caroline: Wow. Thank you. Thank you so much. Let's follow up on that, actually. Tell me about, when you were collaborating on this, like, did you have an audience in mind? And if so, tell me more about that audience.

Liz: I mean, mine was Bess, right? All I want is for Bess to just be like, you know, you know, good work, right? Like that's, you know, or, or Aimi Hamraie, or Alice Wong, right? Like, my audience is other individuals who are engaging rigorously in this space. And I just want to contribute my part, right? But that's what building a culture is. And so, yeah. And aside to that, my audience is whoever is hoarding Helen's archives, like, how do I find? How does, you know, how do Natalie and I get in front of that person? Other than that, like, I didn't, I didn't think much of it. What about you, Nat?

Natalie: I'm thinking back to a conversation that you and I had, Liz, I think, when I was initially talking to you about my interest in working in this realm of disability studies and histories of disability. And I remember you saying that, that make sure that your work is always speaking to a disabled audience. And that the mistake scholars who are working in this space make is that they assume that they are speaking to an able-bodied audience. And so I think that that's been really important advice for this project and then the approach to my work more broadly.

Liz: Yeah. I mean, that's, the website that Alex Haagaard and I created called Critical Axis. It's just, it's, we just upload disability like, ads that feature disability representation. And really, the thing that we've honed in on is there really has yet to be an advertisement that uses disability representation that actually views disabled people as its key audience.

And so it's, you know, it's an unanswered question. How is something experienced when the intended audience is disabled? You know, I think we can - in a more mainstream space, right? Like the Milwaukee Art Museum. And I think Natalie got to play around with that a little bit. And, you know, I just want more. I want the next and the next. And I want it, you know, in museums and, you know, on TV, and, you know, wherever it is. But what does it mean to engage delightfully with something, not just to have something in disability positioned as a fix to a problem, right? Yeah, I just, knowing more about Helen on sort of the scale, the way that we kind of view things now doesn't actually fix anything. But for me, it fixes everything, right? but it's not that sort of problem-solution scenario that we've become so accustomed to.

Caroline: Yeah. And getting back to the language that you used earlier, like disability as a creative practice. Disability, you know, as a site of hacking and stuff like that. Tell me more about where this is going next. Do you have further plans for the exhibit, more exhibits like this? You know, sharing new curatorial ideas with people? Where, where are you going next?

Natalie: Well, I'm pretty sure that the exhibit has been extended, which is a nice outcome. I'm almost positive that it's, that it's been extended until June, which is great. But I would really love to, at least, maybe create a website or to continue to find places in order to re-collect or bring together this, this archive after it's been separated. For me, at least personally, I think it would be nice to utilize a platform like a website in order to, to make public a lot of the sources that we've already digitized.

Like the video that is on display in the Functional Fashions exhibit was part of this four-part series from a television show called *Today's Homemaker*. And it was called, I think, Clothes for the Handicapped. And they're these great television episodes from the 1960s that, you know, they're just on my computer right now. And hundreds of newspaper articles about Functional Fashions as well as all of the research that, that we've already written. And the, you know, Liz and I were part of a panel at the Milwaukee Art Museum with Bess Williamson that, that is online with, with accurate subtitles and everything. So I think that there's, I think the next step for me is to find a place where just all of this, all of these sources can be made public in order for it to be a resource for other people as well. I would love for it to continue to be generative for other individuals and scholars alike.

Liz: Yeah, I think for me, it's sort of a few things. First, I think that the work that, sort of, Helen has led Natalie into in terms of home economics and these homemakers, like - and I keep pushing Natalie into this and one day she's gonna relent - is I'm like, you do realize like what you're actually talking about is like a pre-STEM, right? This is what women were doing before STEM. And I think if we can sort of view it that way in terms of society, like, I think that Natalie's work can be really, really impactful. And so, you know, I'm just excited for Natalie to continue digging. Like, she just, she just finds just the most amazing stuff and is really careful with it.

For me, you know, I'm, I'm desperate to find these archives. I, you know, it's, it's gonna be a dream for Natalie and I that, you know, if, if they, if they show up, right? Like all the things that we can do with them. And until that happens and it may be the, finding the archives will be a result of this, is the work that Natalie described in, you know, in creating a website, in starting to have some of these more complex conversations through various forms of media. And then, you know, for me, like, it's just, again, kind of like living forward with this thing that Helen really gifted me, which is an opportunity to tell things in a more complex way, and what are different outlets that I can do that.

And it's just, I mean it's so fascinating. Like Natalie and I came into this space, like, with sort of two completely different desires. And I think we still very much maintain that. We're both doing vastly different things. And I think that the result of it is something really quite profound. And so, yeah. You know, I just, I know this will continue on, you know, and maybe one day there will be that, sort of, that big kind of shining moment.

Natalie: What I like so much about what you said here, too - I've been thinking about how Helen Cookman and her collaborators created a model for collaboration that you and I have kind of followed in many ways and at a time where I think a lot of people in museum work are thinking about equitable collaboration and, and thinking about curatorial authority and how that, a lot of that model is really changing. Yeah, I think that, I think that their collaboration has really been so impactful to learn about and be inspired by.

Caroline: I want to stretch this into actually the present, not just in the curatorial world, but in the fashion and/or design worlds. So, what do you two see as going on right now in the world in terms of disability and fashion, or disability and design? Are we going in the right direction? Where is there still work to do? Talk me through some of your thoughts on this.

Liz: I feel like Bess actually has a really good answer for this, that I can't, I'm not going to get right, so I'm not, I'm not gonna give Bess's answer, OK? I just, look, I

find it, I find it really, it's, this space is just really kind of frustrating right now. One of the key things that's happening and one of the things we didn't get into is that anybody in fashion right now that has tried to enter the market through disability does so through children, right? So it started out with Tommy Hilfiger. Then it was Zappos, then it was Target, right? They all enter the market through children. And when you think about any other industry, right, nobody enters the market through children. It's a terrible, you know, business decision. And so for that reason, these lines are faltering. And so when you, if you go back and you sort of look throughout history and you say, like, OK, well, what are the, what are the brands that actually did not perpetuate this sort of infantilization? And the only one that you can point to is, is Helen Cookman and her work. And so, you know, and I look at how respected she was, right? And where, like who the collaborators were, and where the clothes wound up in New York Fashion Week. And I actually, I think that Helen, and through Helen, Virginia Pope, created the model for how brands need to be doing disability right now, especially in fashion. And it just, it hasn't happened yet.

Natalie: Well, no, I'm just thinking about, I guess, some of the, some of the projects that happened in, in Britain, like I think Alexander McQueen was an editor of the, I, no, sorry it was *Dazed and Confused* magazine that was all about disability and fashion, which I think was that, I'm pretty sure that came out in the, thousands or nineties, early thousands or nineties. And so I think that there has been disability in fashion, but in a kind of couture moment where there's, there are pieces that are, that are highly aestheticized, where like the disabled body is also really highly aestheticized. And, but I think, I was just thinking about this as I read Garland-Thomson's work on the politics of staring. And she uses that as an example of basically like an exoticizing or alienating gaze that viewers enter into when they see something like that. So I think that, yeah, I think it's existed in certain spaces, like a couture space or a childrenswear space. But that some of those also aren't really talking to each other. So somebody might be aware of like one project, but they might not be aware of, of another. And, and because, I think that this is all part of, too, like the erasure of history that we've been talking about, that, that also leads to this kind of lack of rigor in, in design. So I think, yeah, that's my sense, is that, that there's really been less, less rigor in this field in particular, as a result of some of these, as what Liz been saying, like first-person language.

Caroline: Mmmhmm, yeah, yeah, yeah. I also want to follow up, Liz, with some of these other projects that you've been involved in beyond curation that are potentially, you know, helping move in a different direction, right? and you've mentioned the Critical Axis. [**Liz:** Yeah.] Yeah. And you're also the founder of The Disabled List. And you also initiated something called the WITH Fellowship. [**Liz:** Yeah] So, can you share with our audience what some of these different initiatives are? And I imagine there are some folks in our audience who would actually potentially like to be involved in some of this, so tell me everything.

Liz: Yeah. You know, my feeling is, is a bit of "if you build it, they will come." And, you know, I just, I think Alex and I, we pour ourselves into this every day and just, you know, hope that, you know, like, kind of, our people will kind of make themselves apparent. And it does. It happens, right? We've got Natalie. We've got Bess. So I'll start with the WITH Fellowship. So one of the things was, is that I realized that if you Google the phrase "design for disability," you'll see that it yields more than ten times as many search results as "disability design." So this idea that we are recipients of design has embedded itself into our language.

So I decided that I was going to create this fellowship called the WITH Fellowship. And my fundamental belief was, is, sort of traditionally in fellowships, what happens is, is the goal is to grow and change a person. But my belief was, is if you allow a disabled person to be disabled in the space, they will fundamentally grow and change the space. And that did, to a certain extent, actually really very much prove to be true. But what I realized was, is that the WITH Fellowship is a band-aid over a much larger problem that I'm not focused on. And what that is, is that there is not much in the way of disability studies, critical disability studies curriculum in design schools. And one of the things that I've realized is that it's actually not just disabled students that are not getting their needs met in design schools. It's also design students that have an interest in disability but don't even know what disability is. And so, it's been my belief that if you can start to create disability studies curriculum, what happens is, is these two student bodies, right, find each other, collaborate, and then when they enter the workforce, nobody is thinking that anybody is designing for anybody else. And so I've actually shifted away from the WITH Fellowship and I now just fight local design schools, like, trying to, you know, get them to consider this other way. That's the WITH Fellowship.

At The Disabled List we consult with brands. Sometimes it goes well, sometimes it does not. And then, and then, Critical Axis. So, and that is, again, a repository of, basically at this point, disability in advertising. One of the things I didn't realize when we started doing this, and if you go to the website Critical Axis, A-X-I-S dot org, what you'll experience is, sort of, a whole bunch of disability tropes that are then tagged to the various ads. And so, I didn't realize when I started this that Alex and I were creating a database. But once somebody pointed it out to me, you know, we started to get creative. And one of the first things we did was is, we went through each of the ads and we counted the amount of words that disabled people spoke. And then what we did was is we went on YouTube and we cataloged and we categorized the comments. And so one of the first things that we learned through this dataset is that in advertising right now, the more words a disabled person speaks, the less believable the ad is perceived to be. And so we're starting to kind of gain all these insights that we weren't previously aware of. And so, you know, we're just, as we can, we're just adding, you know, more and more ads to it. So that's been really powerful. But again, it's all toward this larger mission of complexity. Disability representation is not enough. Just, disabled people as knowledge holders, stakeholders, and probably above anything in all of it, I would point to, it's all about a disabled audience. How do you find a disabled audience? And I think that's my goal in all of this.

Caroline: Wow, thank you. So grateful you're doing this, honestly. And I personally have found the visualization that you created on the Critical Axis of, sort of mapping the different disability tropes to be incredibly powerful, and I want to use it as a teaching tool, so -

Liz: One of the things that we did just to kind of show - and you can do this, er, you can't do it on your phone, but you can do it on your computer - to show how a screen reader would read it - if you pull the width to about half, you'll see it in list form so that you can see how it's being read by a screen reader. So that way, you know, it's sort of easier as a teaching tool to describe where, where you can find something.

Caroline: I really appreciate it. And Natalie, I haven't had a chance yet to ask you about your PhD work. Is your curatorial work kind of directly connected to your PhD work? Have they gone off in different directions? What's, what's going on with that?

Natalie: Well, I'm very grateful that you asked, because I'm so thrilled to talk about this. I, I'm just so, I'm so excited to be, to be back in school. And the coursework has been really, really wonderful. I came into the PhD with this really specific project of examining the history of dress and disability in the United States. But my coursework, in particular this semester, I think has been really just mind-expanding and everything that you hope to get out of PhD work. My, I have two courses in particular that are really talking to each other right now. I'm in a design history seminar about histories of making, and that's really been about, sort of, the body of the maker in, in really fascinating ways. We read Pamela Smith's work, *The Body of the Artisan*, and, and many others. We were just looking at the Arts and Crafts movement and some of, some of the, the values that get placed on, on labor. And I think that that has really really been speaking to history, some of these histories of vocational rehabilitation in the United States and how rehabilitation has been, how craft and making has been used in, in rehabilitation. So that's something that I'm really interested in, because there's this paradox of, of making as it also has this potential to really damage the body in interesting ways. Like a lot of, certainly Pamela Smith's work at least, is engaging with the idea of historic master metalworkers who were like working constantly and, and really hurting their bodies. And Chipstone did an interesting show a few years ago about thinking through sort of the true cost of decorative arts in, in museums: these really beautiful objects that you see where, you know, maybe the wood dust that somebody was working with was a carcinogen. Or in ceramics, certainly in Staffordshire in the 1700s the lead glaze that they were using, if you were dipping these pieces into the lead glaze then of course, you were going to get lead poisoning. And the examples, you know, go on and on and on. But, so I think that I'm, I'm really interested in that tension between craft as a practice of rehabilitation and, and that it's something that can also potentially harm your body.

And in part because there are so many discussions around the body of the maker, the body of the artisan, around, like, embodied knowledge or tacit knowledge of making that, I think, and also around the senses, too, like, that there's so much discussion around that. And that, that feels really ripe for a disability studies intervention. So that's where my, my mind is at right now.

But I'm also taking this great course called Discourses of Disability Pre-1800 with Elizabeth Bearden. And that's, that's an English class. But that's really been like giving me the kind of theoretical framework in disability studies that I, that I really felt like I needed. And so I think, I'm certainly still really interested in disability and dress, but that, that conversation, I think is now being inflected with some of these other ideas, in part because the, something that was sort of Functional Fashions-adjacent was, was this vocational rehabilitation program that paired clothing designers, some of whom were Functional Fashions collaborators, with organizations like Lighthouse for the Blind, where the designers essentially created patterns for individuals in those organizations to make and sell as part of an employment, yeah, as part of a project that would theoretically increase their, their chances of employment. So, sorry, that was kind of a rambling answer.

Caroline: No, not all. [**Liz:** It was good]. You're in your PhD and you're taking coursework, so this is exactly right. This business of ideas percolating and inspiration striking in all areas and trying to figure out how you're going to narrow it down. So I think it's brilliant.

Liz: Me too.

Natalie: I think at least some of these conversations too, or thoughts for me, were sparked in this Discourses of Disability class that, we started in, in antiquity, but just, you know, like way earlier than I've been working usually. I'm sort of like a 1700s onwards, at least knowledge base, in terms of material culture and decorative arts. But one of the figures that we were looking at was the Greek God Hephaestus as being this individual with mobility impairment, or who was written about that way, certainly. And he is the metalsmith to the gods. And so he's this master maker and he creates all of these different castings that are, that also come to life as his aides. So anyways, it's just a lot there in terms of makers and makers' bodies, and disability that I'm sort of excited to go into.

Caroline: And since we - this is a great bridge, actually - we've just been talking about education and the incredible generative work that a good course can do in the world - and Liz, you said that you spend a lot of time talking to design schools and trying to get them to understand, you know, disability, the disability community. And I'm wondering - so you've both been involved in education and thinking about, you know, training the next generation of, of people coming through these post-secondary programs. So what should the post-secondary world be doing differently when it comes to disability? You know, if there's something that's going well, that's also something I'd love for you to mention. But, because education is such a powerful tool for change, how can we use it in a way that is, I don't know, moving in the right direction?

Liz: I think this is a conversation that can be a little bit difficult for me to kind of delve into simply for the fact that I've never taken a design course and I've never taken a disability studies course. And so like there, there's a way in which I feel it would be unfair of me to kind of really comment. But I, I will say this much: increasingly, I will get design teachers who reach out to me saying that they're going to be teaching a design class on disability. And they very clearly have no knowledge or, sort of, comprehensive understanding of disability. And like, the thing that I say to them is, is that as a designer, part of your, what you learn in education is that design requires continuing education. Yet somehow when it comes to disability, right, you think you just know. But the things that you think you know are actually the, probably the things that you shouldn't be teaching, right? Because they're filled with bias, and stigma, and et cetera. So I end up more often than not begging these teachers not to teach these classes. And so for me, what it comes down to is, if I'm spending my time begging people to not teach disability, like, I need to be doing something on the other side. And so, you know, that's really where I'm trying increasingly to focus, yeah.

Caroline: Yeah.

Natalie: I think one thing that's been sort of interesting to me is looking at, if you just sort of Google "disability" and then a university's name to see if disability studies as a, as a field of study comes up, because I think more often than not in the university setting, it feels like disability is so heavily associated with access. And for, you know, for students and faculty, which I think, of course, it's very, really, really important that that is addressed in, you know, the student body should feel, as well as teachers, really, really that they belong and that the university is on their side in terms of making, making learning available for everybody.

But I think for me, it's been so important to think about disability culture and disability culture as having history and as, as Liz was saying, sort of this creative approach to, to disability. So I think what I would really like to see is that those two things are either treated in tandem or that they're just more connected and that the

disability studies perspective is, as being elevated. That it's not just sort of a, that disability doesn't get brought up in school as a form of, like, measures of compliance. That it, that it's really treated as a field of study. And while, certainly for me, what's been so gratifying at the University of Wisconsin-Madison is that a lot of my professors who are teaching disability studies are themselves disabled, and so can really, I think, but I think for me, what's important about that, too, is the precedence that the university is setting in terms of hiring individuals with, with that perspective. So I think those things, at least for me, is what's been on my mind.

Liz: We were at - Natalie and Bess and Sandy and I were at dinner the other night, and I think you prompted this, Natalie. It was this conversation about sort of Googling your school and disability. So I went, I went to school for TV production. So nothing remotely related to any of this. I went to Ohio University and I, so I Googled "Ohio University disability studies" is what I Googled. And the first thing that came up was student disability services and the second thing that came up was The Ohio State University Disability Studies Curriculum. And so I just think it's a really enlightening thing to do now. Like it just, it really left its impression on me that if you Google any school and disability studies, like, what is the likelihood, like, how often is it that the services come up and not the curriculum? It would be sort of, that would be an interesting thing to even look into. I mean, all this stuff is so fascinating.

Caroline: It, it has been absolutely extraordinary to talk to you. Thank you both so much for your time, for your intellectual generosity, for sharing your stories and telling me all about this incredible exhibit that I'm sorry I won't get to see in person. And I'm so, so excited for all the work that you two are doing. So thank you.

Liz: Thank you. Just thank you so much for having us. Like, honestly, like, I was so excited about this. So, you know, I just, I appreciate you and your curiosity about what, what Natalie and I are trying to do.

Natalie: Yeah. Thank you so much, Caroline.

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Caroline: Thanks to everyone out there for listening or reading the transcript. Please join us again next time. Bye bye!