

Disability Visibility Podcast

Episode 92: Disabled Afro-Latina Artists

Guest: Jen White-Johnson

Host: Alice Wong

Transcript by [Cheryl Green](#)

For more information: DisabilityVisibilityProject.com/podcast

Introduction

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

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

ALICE WONG: Hey, everybody. Welcome to the *Disability Visibility Podcast*, conversations on disability politics, culture, and media. I'm your host, Alice Wong. Today's episode features an interview with Jen White-Johnson, an Afro-Latina disabled artist, photographer, educator, and designer. Jen is also an Assistant Professor of Visual Communication at Bowie State University. Jen will talk about how being the parent of a neurodivergent Black son politicized her and her work in the midst of racist violence and police brutality this year. You'll also hear her describe one of several graphics she created this year that features the raised Solidarity Fist in black with an infinity sign at the wrist with the words "Black Disabled Lives Matter" below. You can find more of Jen's work on her website at JenWhiteJohnson.com. Please note this interview contains mentions of anti-Blackness, violence, and police brutality. Are you ready?! [electronic beeping] Away. We. Go!

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

ALICE: So, Jen, I was wondering, why don't you introduce yourself and just share a little bit about yourself if you don't mind.

JEN WHITE-JOHNSON: Sure. So, my name is Jennifer White-Johnson. My pronouns are he/she—or sorry!—she/her and ella 'cause I'm Afro-Latina: half black, half Puerto Rican. So, I grew up in a multilingual family, and so it's really been beautiful to grow up in a really multicultural house. I am cinnamon-skinned, and I have a gap in my teeth. And I have curly kind of blondish-brown hair and highlights, and I have on some wide-frame glasses. And I'm a bit round. I have like a really round face, and I have a birthmark on my left cheek. And I'm wearing earrings that say "Resistencia," and I have on a purple headband. So, I came trying to look like, you know, kinda cute for this interview.

BOTH: [laugh]

JEN: And I'm a mother, I'm an activist, I'm a wife, and I'm also an educator. I teach at Bowie State University, which is the oldest HBCU in the state of Maryland. So, I've been teaching there for about nine years, and I teach graphic design and photography. I also have Graves' disease, which takes a toll on my energy and fatigue and anxiety. And so, I have a lot of hormonal imbalances with my thyroid, and I've had it since my late teens. So, I kinda struggle with that of bit, but I keep on moving forward. And I was able to get treatment for that early on, but I have no thyroid. So, I kinda deal with the, I kinda deal with a lot of those health challenges. And I have to

take a hormone replacement drug to kind of make sure that my thyroid, or what's left of it, kinda functions properly. I also have undiagnosed ADHD, so I have a lot of executive functioning challenges. But I'm learning to accept it and learning to kinda let it build me up as an artist and build me up as a person. And I also have an autistic son. He's seven years old, and he's like the light of my life. I'm his biggest fan.

So, disability and visibility just means a lot to me of being able to kind of uplift folks who have different narratives and who have their own way of expression and their own way of communicating and their own way of being.

[Afro-psycho beat music break]

Being politicized as the parent of a neurodivergent child

ALICE: Clearly, you're a proud parent of your son, Knox. Can you tell me about how being a parent of a neurodivergent child has politicized you?

JEN: Yes, yes, yes! I think that instantly, most Black families, families of color who have a child who's diagnosed as autistic or ADHD, any kind of neurodivergent difference, we're meant to believe that OK, well, our kid is not normal, and our kid is not perfect. And that they need to be fixed and that they need to be healed and that they need to adapt and conform. So, instantly, those are the stigmas that are set in place for when your child is diagnosed. And that's how we felt. I mean, we even felt like, oh, what do we say to our families? Like what do we say to our friends who don't even really understand autism or what being an autistic person is? Because instantly it's like, "[gasps] Oh my gosh! It's gonna be OK!" Or "my cousin has autism." They express it as if it's like this illness that needs to be cured and that it's this disorder. And I know for lots of families, it can be challenging. And so, I've really just learned to do my research, to listen to other autistic advocates, to kinda let that really fuel me and to really educate me on making sure that my relationship with my son is of value.

And so, seeing how autistic people from all cultures are treated, it's really difficult to sit with that and to just say, "Oh, well, that's not my problem. That's not my issue. That's not my community. My son is my son." But after you see enough of the way that the Black autistic community is ostracized and misunderstood and attacked in a variety of ways, or just left out of the conversation in the media in so many different avenues, yes, as an artist, I feel like, OK, well, what do I do? Like how does representation and how does how neurodiversity play a role in my overall family value and in my overall family expression? And naturally, as an artist, I'm like, OK, well, I feel like it's like I have a social responsibility to use art to amplify, to educate, right? And it's not anything that I felt like I was forced to do. I felt like it was just a natural response to kind of use art to kinda speak in a unique way.

And it changed me as a mother. It really changed my perspective on how Black autistic folks are just portrayed in the media. And so, naturally, I'm looking at children's books and I'm looking at the media and I'm looking at other autistic families. And I'm noticing the same kinda narratives: like, "Oh, my kid did this today, and my kid did that today. And it's so difficult. It's so hard as a parent." And right. All of those things are valid. But I just felt like there has to be more. There has to be more to this story, more to this narrative than just these complaints and these sob stories. And again, I have to be very sensitive with how I talk about that, because I'm not trying to offend families that are dealing with different aspects of the spectrum. And I respect it. But I know that for me, I wanted to be able to focus on the joy and what I don't really see being portrayed in just in terms of just the autistic community in general, at least, in 2013 when he was first diagnosed.

ALICE: I love your stickers with the phrase “Autistic joy.”

JEN: Mmhmm.

ALICE: Because your naming it; you’re calling it. And why is it so important to focus on joy when we’re talking about shifting the narratives about autistic people?

JEN: Yes. And it goes back to what I was saying. It goes back to personally, for me, what I saw was sadness. Stephon Watts was murdered and brutalized by the police in 2012, which was the year that my son was born. And I didn’t even know of that narrative until my son was a lot older, as I started to do research. And I’m like, man! So, when my son was born, there was an autistic kid who was completely murdered and brutalized by just not having the proper people care in terms of when they came to kind of confront the situation that his family was dealing with. And so, I just wanted to be able to offer some sort of response that was uplifting. It’s really simple: uplifting and empowering.

And I realized that I could be friends with autistic people, that I could get to know the community, and that I didn’t only have to befriend other autistic parents or other parents who had autistic children. That I could be friends with autistic adults, autistic teenagers. That I could learn from them, that I could have these really beautiful conversations with them to understand, you know, hey, these are the kinds of relationships that I know that I could have with Knox now and in the future. So, yeah. So, just being able to understand the community and to listen to the community was just really instrumental in how I just understood the autistic culture.

ALICE: Yeah. Thank you for that. And on your website, you describe mothering as an act of resistance to ableist visual culture.

JEN: Mmhmm.

ALICE: So, I think you touched upon it earlier, but what are some examples of neurotypical and ableist visual cultures that are predominant today?

JEN: Yeah, I mean, I know like ableist culture to me is just really condescending imagery or imagery that’s very one-sided and one view, that doesn’t show a variety of different aspects of someone who’s autistic. It may be only showing one type of identity, like one kind of race. I wasn’t really seeing language, positive language being used, or it was just, again, focusing on let’s research autism so that we can cure it. Or let’s focus on making sure that these kids don’t get these vaccines because they’re going to be completely disposable and not of any use if they have autism. And all those were just really offensive examples for me as a mother to be able to know that, oh, OK, if my kid is Black and autistic, then he’s definitely going to be mishandled.

I’m starting to see a shift, and I’m really enjoying it. And I definitely wanna highlight Erica Milsom, who was the director of *Loop*, the Pixar short. And then I decided just to create my own, you know, with the photo zine. And I think what helps to kinda set what I’m doing apart, not saying that I’m unique in any way in the way that I’m handling this or approaching this, but I just don’t— And there are tons of Black autistic artists out there. But I just really didn’t see many parents who were artists responding or using design and art to kinda shift and break certain stigmas. And that’s what I really wanted to do. And I knew that it was more about oh, Knox’s narrative. I could take, right, a sticker that says, “Autistic joy” and have that amplified and empower a whole body of autistic folks. That was just my goal.

[Afro-psycho beat music break]

Jen's images of Black Autistic Lives Matter

ALICE: So, several weeks ago, in response to the murder of George Floyd, Black artists have created really powerful work to remember him and countless others and continue to do so. And I saw these graphics by you with the phrase, "Black Autistic Lives Matter" and the hashtag #BlackDisabledLivesMatter.

JEN: Mmhmm.

ALICE: And I wanted to ask you, what prompted you to create these images? And also, what was your process in designing them? How did you kind of make the design decisions in terms of designing them? What was your thought process?

JEN: Yeah, I mean, my thought process, it was difficult because I was like, well, you know, sure, it's easy to come up with typographic expressions and using just like a really bold thought to declare a statement. But if I had the opportunity to take type and take digital illustration and merge them to say something even stronger, to create some sort of unifying symbol or just some sort of unifying visual, I was like, all right. Well, there's the Black Power fist, and I can kind of play around with that notion. But when it came to disability, I was like, all right. Well, I need to be able to just infuse a symbol that is easily recognizable and that is also powerful and that also represents disability culture to a certain extent. And that was definitely not a puzzle piece, you know? Because I feel like, again, my son isn't a puzzle piece, and he's not this mystery that we need to solve. He's a human, and he's his own person. And he's already, like his story and his humanity will never end, right? So, I think that the infinity symbol means so many different things for so many people within the autistic community. But it was really just an experiment, and it was really just something that I was really playing around with.

And as a Black mother, being a mother of an autistic son who's instantly gonna be misunderstood, whether he wants to or not, because of his disability, I just couldn't help but think that George Floyd and his murder and stuff on lots and all of these folks now, like Elijah McClain and Rayshard Brooks and all these folks, it's like they were fathers. Elijah McClain was like a kid, you know, a disabled Black kid, like sickle cell anemia, a sweet kid. And I'm thinking these are folks who have regular, everyday narratives, just like Knox, who have their differences and maybe disabilities to a certain extent, but they're still misunderstood. They're still equally misunderstood and considered garbage and like animals, like they could just be thrown in the trash at the drop of a hat. So, it's really just up to us to continue to shift that narrative, to continue to remind people, yeah, we have kids who are disabled, but they're not disposable. They're not...they deserve the opportunity to exist, period!

ALICE: Yeah. I mean, it was really exciting, it's been really exciting to see your work show up in protests all over the world. You were at a BLM protest in Washington, DC on June 6th this of year with a disabled contingent led by two Black disabled people: Justice Shorter and Keri Gray. What was it like being there and documenting the protest through photography?

JEN: Yeah.

ALICE: Because I saw a lotta great videos and photos by you. And I just wanna say I appreciate that so much because as somebody who couldn't be there, you really gave, you know, you really helped create this coverage so that everybody can witness and observe. So, I just wanna share that gratitude for you and your work during that protest.

JEN: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, I mean, it's just it's phenomenal because that was my first time really going out with social distancing and the coronavirus. But I wanted to be able to at least be

present because I knew that I could, that I could be a resource. And that was just really what I wanted to do. And it really just came from Imani Barbarin saying, Hey, we've been sharing this graphic, Jen. Can you get some t-shirts made? Can you get some prints made for Keri and Justice? Here's their contact information." And I was like, OK. Oh wow! Oh, they're here in DC. This is amazing. And I'm in Baltimore, so I was just like a train ride away. And I got on the phone with Justice, and we had an amazing conversation. And I was like, "Look." I was like, "I'm actually getting a whole bunch of posters made. I will come to DC, and I'll just bring them to you. Oh, and by the way, do you happen to have anyone who's documenting this? Because I can bring my camera." And so, Justice was like, "Yeah, we have a media team, and you can be feeding them imagery all throughout the day." And I was like, "I got you." I came with my camera.

And like I said, we were out there with our masks, and it was like our first time really being out together, I mean, with other people! It was so interesting because we had to stop ourselves from hugging and from embracing, and we're like, "Eh! Eh!" And it was just, it was so rewarding. I'm like, if I am gonna go out, this was a really beautiful experience to be out with my disability community, being a resource and really helping, like you said, capture the narrative. It was hot. We were just, we were sweltering. It was like 90 degrees. I almost had a heat stroke. And this was right in front of the White House, literally! It was just we had medics there. It was rough work. And I was like, man. 'Cause it had been a while since I'd been out shooting. I'm a professor, so I'm usually like in a lab helping students design logos and websites and posters. Rarely do I really get an opportunity to be out protesting in the field, on the ground, in this way. You know, I was weaving in and out, making sure that we were capturing every chant, every sign, every angle, all the way down to the White House. And it was phenomenal.

And when we wrapped up, I was like, "Look." I was like, "Let me know what else you need, because I wanna continue to be friends. I wanna have a relationship with you guys. I don't want this to be the last time that we interact or that I help organize." So, it was just like I just felt like I was able to gain some really beautiful partnerships and collaborative experiences. But then also feel like I was seen. I felt like we were just like a whole bunch of misfits. It was just amazing. It was just [laughs with delight], it was perfect. It was exactly the way it needed to be. And it was like older folks, young folks, families, and then people who were joining us along the way as we marched down to the White House. And then to see the posters, to take that all in and to watch people pasting them on cardboard or adding other messages around them and sticking them on cardboard alongside stories of disabled folks who've been victimized and brutalized by the police. Freddie Gray and Sandra Bland and Laquan McDonald and all these narratives or folks that people don't even think about: oh, post-traumatic stress and epilepsy and lead poisoning, All of these environmental narratives that people completely dismiss and they don't hold memory to when we're thinking about these Black disabled bodies who've been taken. So, it was really important to us that we felt that we could really educate folks around us with this artwork, that it could create a social, a socially-charged message.

And we're gonna keep it going. I created a prototype of the Solidarity Fist as a mural concept. And I was like, "Is it cool if we try to do this, like big, big time, big like for the masses?" And they were like, "Wow, Jen. Yes, let's do it." 'Cause I knew that I wanted to continue to see the graphic and the symbol used in a variety of ways, and I didn't want it to just be reviewed or taken in, in one particular type of art expression. That it can continue to be transformed. So, yeah. So, right now we're looking for locations in DC. And I would really love to see it as like a worldwide action where if we were super big time, the mural would be going up in different cities all on July 26, simultaneous, live mural participatory events. That's the goal at the end of the day, is to kind of see the symbol continue to just transform spaces.

[Afro-psycho beat music break]

Jen's dreams and ambitions for her art

ALICE: So, I just wanna end with one final question 'cause I know that we've talked for a while. What are dreams and ambitions for your photography and art? What do you see for yourself?

JEN: Yeah, I think my ambitions are just to continue collaborating and to continue just amplifying and uplifting lives, whatever that looks like, whether it's through creating really beautiful narratives. I was in the middle of a residency, an artist-mother studio residency in February. And when social distancing had to kind of come into place, I didn't have access to my studio anymore. And one of the things that I had planned was to just shoot portraits of autistic people and their families. And yes, it's been done before. But I don't know. I really wanted to be able to photograph folks with their stim toys just being themselves, but really kind of like capturing these really beautiful, soulful, up close portraits, capturing facial expressions, smiles.

I think one of the really beautiful things that I've seen is Affect The Verb, the online disability collective where it's like stock imagery of disabled BIPOC folks, specifically women and femmes being photographed with a cane or in a wheelchair or with their stim toys. And I just really love seeing that representation. So, I wanted to be able to shoot images specifically of other BIPOC folks, especially Black mothers, local Black moms, in the DC-Maryland-Virginia area with their autistic kids, but just really helping to capture the soulfulness again and just representation. Because we really don't get a chance to kind of see them. We see them in these little ad campaigns. But to see it done purposefully, like for the intention of capturing a really true, honest narrative, that was something that I had planned. And then I was gonna do interviews and do another photo zine. And I was gonna travel and interview autistic adults, specifically Black autistic folks to kind of capture: so, tell me something really cool about what you love. And I've tried to do it in unique ways with little zine workshops that I've had with families where they create these fun little expressive digital collages and collages by hand asking other people, like, how do you see me or how do I see me? So, I've done like little zine workshops with families. But I want to be able to kinda just do a really soulful portrait series.

And then also just creating more opportunities for my autistic students to have proper accommodations in the classroom. So, just being a part of those communities and helping to kinda organize more conversations around neurodiversity in the classroom, but specifically for Black students, because they often are, right, they're not diagnosed or they're misdiagnosed or they don't receive the proper accommodations. And so, just continuing to be an advocate to help them feel like it's OK. You can be yourself. My classroom, my office is a safe space. And allowing, being open to more innovative ways to tell these narratives, but also realizing that families and kids are being diagnosed every day. Adults are being diagnosed late. So, it's important that they feel like, oh, well, hey. I'm still continuing to see myself. You know what I mean? I don't wanna ever feel that the message or the artwork isn't needed anymore or isn't necessary. Because there's always gonna be someone out there that needs to be able to see it.

ALICE: And what's really exciting is that when you put something out there in the world, you don't know where it goes. That's a really cool thing, is that it creates ripple effects that you won't realize. Really, that's the power of having work out there that is it's gonna be received in different ways. But it's gonna travel into all these different hands and eyes and just different places. And that could be quite an adventure. That's the unknown, which is like a little risky, but it's always, I think, worth the risk too, that there may be people that end up, I think, distorting it or coopting or plagiarizing it, but the fact that it's out there and changing lives is often why we do

what we do. So, just thank you again, Jen, for taking with me today. I just really appreciate your time and your space and your wisdom.

Wrap-up

[hip hop]

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

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

You can also find out more about Jen at my website.

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Thanks for listening! And see you on the Internets! Byeeee!

♪ Rocket to the blast off
Stop, drop dance off ♪