You're tuned into a kind of harmony. In this podcast, we're looking to transcend the physical limitations of daily life. In each episode, we speak with a different practitioner who uses sound as a tool or method for connection, transcendence and healing. We're your hosts, Julia E Dyck and Amanda Harvey.

In this episode, we spoke with Olivia Dreisinger. Olivia is a disability scholar, filmmaker and writer. Her own fluctuating abilities often dictate how she produces work, a process that regularly leads her to new and generative mediums to explore. Currently, she is pursuing a PhD at the University of British Columbia, in the rhetoric of health and medicine. We wanted to speak with Olivia about her practice as a researcher and podcaster. We discussed the intersections of disability and academia, as well as her unique relationship with sound.

Olivia

I'm Olivia Dreisinger. I do a number of things. I guess I'm a disability scholar. And then I have some artistic practices that I do, like filmmaking and writing, photography, some animation, things like that. That's me.

Amanda

Where are you at in terms of your grad schooling?

Olivia

Well, I'm three and a half years in now. Yes, that's correct. I just finished the prospective stage, which is basically where I propose all my chapter outlines for my dissertation. So that was quite interesting. It's kind of hard to write summaries of book chapters when you haven't really for them yet. And I assume that it's going to change quite a bit. But this month, I should be starting to write chapter one. So now I have to get in the headspace of writing. And also because my dissertation is on medically unexplained illnesses, I have to read about health stuff a lot. And I kinda am procrastinating from doing that. Just because I don't know why I chose this topic is what I'm trying to say like, as a disabled person thinking about health more. And also, when I started this PhD, I didn't think that there would be a global pandemic happening, where you're just surrounded by health discourse. 24/7. So yep, I gotta get there.

Amanda

That's totally reasonable and understandable to procrastinate on such a thing.

Olivia

Yeah, I mean, I'm sure once I start writing it, I'll be like, you know, Intuit and stuff. But I just have to try to create sort of these like healthy outside world boundaries that I'm sure every academic struggles with when writing such a big project

Amanda

I can imagine. And I read through your dissertation, like chapter breakdown, and I was extremely fascinated as someone who is not really educated on the world of medically unexplained illnesses.

Olivia

Yeah, I don't think Well, I mean, I chose the topic too, because in my field has not really been written about and medically unexplained illnesses make up like a large portion of doctor's visits, for instance, it's actually like a pretty big problem in health care. And it seems like those are the cases that annoyed doctors the most. So that's kind of what I'm looking at to like how people with this are treated by doctors or strangers or family.

Amanda

So you're in grad school right now. And you're simultaneously working on a podcast that delves into the realities of being a disabled student, and it's titled diagnosis grad school. And I was wondering if you could tell us about this project and your reasons for choosing audio to disseminate this body of work?

Olivia

Yeah, so the podcast series is basically about just being disabled in grad school. And I really wanted to make this podcast because I became chronically ill during my masters and then I really realized like when you go from undergrad to grad school, you know, they're not really expecting disabled people to be there. Really, that's what it feels like to me. In undergrad, for instance, you know, they have like, accessibility office and you know, people who kind of like advocate for you. You can have extra time on tests or assignments, or you know, things like that. But once you get to grad school, the expectations change, they don't really know how to, like, make academia flexible and in the higher levels for disabled bodies. So yeah, that's sort of what the podcast is about. And I'm, I'm talking about my own experiences, going through the PhD, and then interviewing other disabled scholars. And then I'm trying to make it more fun by having a few of the episodes also, narratively, go through like two fiction stories with disabled students. So one of them is Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, where both the creature and Victor Frankenstein go away to university and it's about disability and how I'm reading it. And then also, Octavia Butler's parable series features a lot about like disabled pedagogy. So hopefully, that'll make a bigger draw into such a niche topic. And to make things a little more fun. And that's also exactly why I chose audio. For this sort of topic. It's just that you know, you can have like fun music and jazz it up a bit and just have kind of this like, story unfold through audio.

Amanda

Amazing, I listened to the introductory episode. And immediately after I was like, I want to listen to more like it's so beautifully produced. And I think because the topic is so niche, like, it's very intriguing. So I'm excited to hear the rest of it. Oh,

Olivia

good. Yeah, I hope people fun to listen to. Yeah, I mean, grad school already a niche topic, then disability, you know, combined. Hopefully, there's listeners out there.

Amanda

I think that's kind of key for listenership is finding like a niche that hasn't been explored yet. Right? Have you done most of your interviews already with others? Or are you kind of in the the early stages of production?

Olivia

Actually, I did, like most of them last year, and then my computer died, and I lost all of them, which was okay, because I was doing the interviews kind of in the early days before, I was really realizing what I wanted the podcast to be about. Luckily, I have transcripts that I can refer to, but I don't have to recorded voices anymore. So then I had to, like redo all of them. But yeah, so I still would like to do a few more is what I'm trying to say, I guess. But yeah, there was this like catastrophe of, of losing the initial round of interviews. As a scholar, you know, that hurts. But there's the transcripts. So I got the data still, you know,

Amanda

I'm glad you have that. Yeah, definitely a painful process to lose files Yeah.

I also wanted to ask you about another project, what kind of mother, which is a documentary that you've produced that discusses your mother's illnesses and suicide? In the documentary you explore your mother's past to gain a deeper understanding of her and her life? How do you feel connecting with and hearing stories from those involved in her life impacted your healing process, and if you could just even talk a little bit about the process of the documentary itself?

Olivia

So the documentary is about my mother's suicide, which happened? Well, in March, it'll be 11 years. So quite a while ago, I was, I think, like 20 at the time when it happened. And it kind of took me a long time to like I always knew, like, I want to do something in my life about my mother and her death. But it took me a decade to actually figure out kind of like what I should do or just be ready to touch the subject again. And so I thought, you know, a documentary would be a good format. And when I first jumped about this project, I knew I wanted to interview people who were adults who would have known my mother better than I was because I, you know, was a kid when my mom was very sick. She wasn't around, barely at all, and some adults in my life seemed like the best point of access to maybe getting some sort of story together. So I grew up with nannies, these kind of standard mothers, who, for the first part of my life lived in the house. And when my mother was also still there, and my dad was often away, so the nannies were really in an awkward position, kind of having to look after four kids, and then my mother kind of being there, but not being there. So yeah, I knew that that was what I really wanted to

do. Sorry, is this making sense? Yeah, okay. Okay. So yeah, so once I had that this is kind of like the archive I want to go into, you know, I went through the family photo books, and we have like, a really meager amount of home videos. So I digitized all of that and just kind of tried to see what I could find. The interesting thing with the home videos, I did find they're not like anything spectacular. Like you've seen other documentaries, where some parent has, like, you know, documented everything about their family's life, like my family is not like that. There's more average kind of family archive. But my mom really did like filming. And she made my dad buy her like two video cameras at that time. So her filming style is it was interesting to me, she was a young mother. So her only subject matter was just filming us around the house, just doing random things. And then when she left the house, the nannies took over to film. But there was was much more like document stuff for my dad. So it was pretty boring. Like, it was only like birthday parties, or Christmas. Like those are really the two genres once my mom leaves.

Amanda

Yeah, I thought the archival footage, first of all was so beautiful. And I wonder about the process of digitization. But more so how do you feel connecting with and kind of hearing stories from those involved in her life has impacted your healing process, if at all?

Olivia

Right. So the actual production of the film was really hard, emotionally, which I mean, I expected but like, you know, I don't go through everyday thinking about like, Oh, my mother is dead. And so making the film, I kind of had to think about that every single day. And then also, well, I unfortunately only had access to one nanny in the end. And then also, I interviewed my mother's ex husband who had found her dead. And I had never, no one had ever talked to him about that before. And yeah, talking to those two people. I found out things about my mother that I didn't really want to know, like, maybe that stuff's not in the film, but it's in like, you know, the uncut footage. It was interesting to me because I didn't really expect like the wound in me to get bigger, if that makes sense. But I think then in the editing process, and working on it post production, that's where I felt I could close that wound back down. And like actually start feeling pretty okay. And then feeling like, Okay, this story can kind of close now, if that makes sense.

Amanda

Yeah, for sure. Definitely. The scene where you're interviewing your mother's ex husband was, yeah, really. So moving. And he says something along the lines of like, I haven't really talked about this. And it's probably like, good for me to talk through it.

Olivia

Yeah, no, exactly. Like that was a really special day. And like, I'm thankful he let us record it too, because he wasn't even at my mother's funeral. I'm not sure why. But maybe it's just too hard for him at that time. So yeah, he didn't get to talk to any of us about it for that whole time. And I can't imagine how

awful that would have been just especially because he also found her. So there's that added extra perfect detail. So yeah, I'm glad that that could be done.

Amanda

When do you feel that sound or the voice? You know, the voice of others, the voice of your mother played any role in this process?

Olivia

Well, it was interesting when I was going through the videotapes, and just realizing like I really wanted my mother's voice to be there. And it really wasn't and she's like barely ever in front of the camera either. And I was really like longing to see sort of a recorded version of her like moving and talk gain that I could just feel like I could attach myself to as an adult. But yeah, I wasn't really there. So yeah, I guess hearing my nanny, Catherine talk about her or Robert, her ex husband was important. Now that I have something on record that I can we listen to just them talking about my mother?

Amanda

And do you find yourself really listening?

Olivia

I wouldn't say I really listen. But I know it's there. And that's comforting. Yeah, because I know some other people have like, one of my friends, his great aunt just passed away. So he recently is going through, like all their archives, and he found like an old voice message tape, where it was called, like, from an answering machine. Yeah, the answering machine tape. And there's things recorded on there, or there's like a small interview that she does with her sisters. And I don't know, I felt like I was not a bit jealous, but a bit sad that I didn't have something like that from my mom. I do, though, have some short stories she wrote when she was in high school, and some old film photography. So I guess I do have some other formats to kind of, you know, see what she was like, at that time.

Amanda

Yeah, it's really interesting to think about these kind of time capsules of this ephemeral thing. And I feel it kind of leads into this other question that I was thinking about, if does understanding your lived experience, or the lived experience of others via kind of an apparatus or a recorded medium allow for reflection that is generative or conducive to healing? Like in us, just speaking, you were saying? It's comforting to have this archive?

Olivia

Yeah, no, it's it's definitely it's like a, like a living document for me that you can kind of revisit. I remember at one point, I was going to destroy my high school diaries or something. And my dad told me not to. And I'm really thankful that I didn't even though I cringe every time I think about the stuff

recorded in them, but like now, because I'm trying to find that stuff about my mother, then I'm really thankful that there's some things that do exist, my grandma kept a lot of things about my mom. Like her short stories, she kept a lot of newspaper clippings about my mother's illnesses, which I found really interesting. So my, my grandma also, it seemed like, was a big record keeper. In the family. There was this other document that I found, it was like, handwritten dates, and like doctor's appointments that my grandma was taking my mother to, which I also found really interesting and bizarre. But in that document, I think it's like, within like the doctor's appointments, like she records when I like rolled over for the first time or something like that. I just thought it was weird that like, I make an entry point that's like non medical, like in between, like my mother to see psychiatrists or other doctors like, what also kind of made me sad thinking about like me as an infant, and that my mother's so sick, and then I don't know where I am. But at least that was recorded.

Amanda

Do you find the process of making documentaries? Because this is, you have, obviously a history of exploring subjects through this medium, as well as podcasting. Like, do these feel cathartic to you? In some way? Yeah,

Olivia

I think so. I mean, they do add extra stress on my life. But I think like, by the end of it, it feels definitely like cathartic. I mean, like making these things is like an exercise and like problem solving when it's difficult to write or produce it. But then by the end, you've kind of arranged it in a way that's not only makes sense for you, but hopefully for like a larger audience that has like a hopefully, like a bigger meaning beyond my own desire to make it. And I think by sharing that part of myself in this particular way, I also find that really healing to try to like yeah, like arrange a meaningful story, is I guess what I'm always sort of oriented towards whenever I'm making a project. And just yeah, like, I'm thinking about myself, obviously, because it's my personal story, but I want to try to make it think beyond that so that other people can have access to the story. Another thing I forgot to add about the my mom documentary, but one of the things that I'm also thinking about briefly in the film is just about, hopefully becoming apparent one day myself, and I think that's also maybe why it took me about a decade to want to do Make the story. I've always kind of been afraid to be a parent, because I've always been kind of scared about becoming my mother. And now that I'm closer to becoming a parent. Yeah, I think the story really asks a lot of those questions about just, you know, what kind of mother will I be as well?

Amanda

And do you feel that something that you're thinking about often now, about being a mother?

Olivia

Yeah, definitely. Because I feel like hopefully, I'll, I'll be a parent in the next two years.

Amanda

Wow, exciting. Yeah,

Olivia

I hope so. I mean, I do have the same illnesses as my mother. And I think that's also what really has scared me about, because I've only had this one roadmap, and it's a roadmap that ended in fiery destruction. My mother, and I know that I don't have to go that way. Obviously, my life is different. But hopefully, I can tell a different story in that way.

It's funny, because I make these kind of like narration or audio kind of forms. But I'm really not like a sound person. And I think, like how a disability informs everything I do, it also informs my relationship to sound. This is something I haven't talked about before, maybe it's not even very interesting. But as a little kid, I had like ear tubes like ear surgery, because I couldn't hear properly. For the first couple years of my life. When I had to go to speech therapy. I have like a hard of hearing kind of accent for a large part of my early years. And I had to wear these horrible earplugs if I took a shower or went swimming because I couldn't get any water in my ears. So even at swimming lessons, they're trying to tell me what to do. And I can't hear because I have these like your plugs in. But the weird thing about getting those ear surgeries, and going from kind of not hearing to hearing was it made me really sensitive to sound. So as a kid, like if I was upstairs, and my parents were downstairs, I could like hear everything. Somehow it felt like they were screaming when they weren't there just talking to that normal level. So yeah, I don't know, like, sound for me is very like jumbly. Like, I'd probably rather live in a much more like silent world than I do now.

Amanda

Wow. I mean, honestly, wouldn't we all? Who wants noise? Yes,

Olivia

maybe some people but I don't know me either. I am always trying to find silence in my everyday life. And it feels almost impossible.

Amanda

I really appreciate you sharing that. I mean, I am so interested in this disability informs your relationship to sound. And also just like, you know, your early years kind of like having this really heightened sense of hearing. And do you still hear in the same way? Do you feel?

Olivia

I don't think I hear in the same way. But that would be unbearable. Because it was kind of like an over like over hearing. I don't know. Like it was like too much hearing, if that makes sense. But now I am just

like I need like a noise machine going. I have earplugs like, I definitely feel like I'm not built for a world of sound. I think that's also because I'm living in Vancouver right now too. And I find it really loud for me. The city the city is too loud for me. You know, like can hear people walking outside or, or cars or like the bakery behind my place has the stand mixer going and I can hear that because it's like a steady hum. And it's like you said you try to find silence wherever you go. And here is just like there's always a noise. Yeah, I feel powerless. The noise of the city.

Amanda

Wow. Yes. This resonates with me so deeply. I wonder if you feel that, that affects your kind of daily life?

Olivia

Oh, definitely. Yeah. No, it's hard for me to focus for sure. Just because I also in addition to this hearing thing as a child like my house was also just very quiet in general, like my parents don't listen to music. So I never understood people who could work and listen to music. I need complete silence. So if there is like a sound outside, it will distract me from, you know focusing on a task.

Amanda

Do you wear noise cancelling headphones or earplugs when you're working in order to focus?

Olivia

Now I just try to like, run from room to room to find just the quietest. That works too. Yeah, we all have our strategies.

Amanda

So I wanted to talk a little bit about your research regarding animal emotional labor, which we have touched on for sure. In the past, I read through heart centered beans, and I pulled these two points out, one was disabled people are forming intense animal partnerships, because our systems have failed them, and outsourcing our emotional despair on to animals exploit their empathy, I was wondering if you could kind of tell us a little bit about this work more generally. And the role of asking animals for help.

Olivia

Right. So this idea also kind of started when I went to horse assisted therapy. Yes, and that it's in itself is kind of this weird intersection between animal labor and disability. And then it got me thinking about animal emotions being a resource we also take. So you know, at this particular place, I was going to in Vancouver, it's like a little farm in the city. Kind of like more in like, it's not really a rural area. But there are some like a farms and I use like farms very loosely as a term here, where you go, and there's a life

coach who works with you in the horse, and you kind of like stand in this little pen. And the coach kind of like leads you through different things to talk about, or, or somatic like bodily exercises, and the horse is permitted to kind of come and go in the session. But, you know, I was standing there crying my eyes out about whatever I was talking about. And then afterwards, thinking about, like, the horses own kind of living standards. And I found out later that, you know, like, I thought that maybe the horses would get to go to a field to exercise, you know, and kind of release, have their own release, emotionally and physically. But I think their lives are predominantly in those pens. And there's this like little dirt ring that they only get to go in sometimes. And that's kind of the extent of their life. And I just, I felt so terrible afterwards that I had kind of had this like, emotional extraction experience with this poor animal who really doesn't have much of a choice. And I mean, they say the horse can choose to come in and in and out of the session, but it's like, what else does the horse have to do anyways? Like, it can't really go very far in the pen, it's probably bored. So maybe that's the only reason why it's interacting is just for some mental stimulation, I'm not sure. And also, when writing that essay I'd come across, it's called animals five freedoms from Farm Animal Welfare Council. So just goes Freedom from Hunger and thirst, freedom from discomfort, freedom from pain, injury or disease, freedom to express normal behavior and freedom from fear and distress. And I don't know, I just, it's kind of interesting criteria to think about with, quote, unquote, like domesticated animals, like, I'm not even sure if I like that term anymore, because I'm not sure if the horse would choose to be there. If it had, you know, another life it could go to. Yeah, those were kind of the foundational thoughts behind that.

Amanda

Did you do horse assisted therapy for a while? Or was this kind of like a one session? Experience?

Olivia

I went, I think a total of three times. And the third time actually was during my mom documentary. And we filmed it. And it just felt so weird. And then I also watched it back and you know, I could see, like, this particular horse was a new horse because the one that I had worked with had just died. And it had just died from being burnt out, I think and not wanting to be there anymore, because like, she was a pretty young horse. And then this horse, I've looked on their website since and she's gone. I'm not sure maybe they like moved her elsewhere because she did not want to be there. It seemed that even in the session, I was quite scared of her and her energy, you know, And we weren't even really like in the pen with her for a lot of the time we were in like a neighboring pen. So that there was some physical protection from her. And I was just thinking like, this is not like this is dangerous for people and also for this horse. And then yeah, also that didn't make it in the documentary because it just it just felt too weird.

Amanda

Yeah, you could feel the horses energy very interesting that you say like you felt fearful.

Olivia

Yeah, she just felt kind of unsettled. I wouldn't say angry. I don't know the horse well enough, but it just wasn't like a calm energy. So.

Amanda

So after these experiences, do you feel asking animals for help in our into on our healing journeys? is ethical or just,

Olivia

I mean, I think it's probably like, it just depends. I'm not sure though, like, like, I know, like dogs and cats are probably people's like, number one experiences for sort of these, like asking for emotional support. And I don't know, maybe also, because I'm living in the city, I feel more cynical about it. Like, in some of the apartments beside me, they have large dogs. And if you walk by the door, the dog is like literally like body slamming against the door and like barking aggressively, and it's so stressed out. But then when the owner comes home, they just see, you know, like a happy dog greeting them. And then that person's like, feels good, because they can come home to an animal. But when they're gone, the dog is so stressed out. So I'm not sure I know. This is just, you know, this is like the worst case sort of thing. But I think it's also just me being over the city right now.

Amanda

No, I feel that and I feel that that actually happens a lot. And some folks adopt animals for quote unquote, selfish reasons and aren't really thinking about maybe about the quality of life of the animal, but kind of like his or her their emotional well being, when they're not around. And

Olivia

yeah, there's there's this good quote by Sinara Taylor, I think that's how you pronounce her name. But it goes, quote, If animal and disability oppression are entangled, might not that mean, their paths of liberation are entangled, as well. And I think like the main problem that I have, with the city dog example is just that how we've kind of structured our lives now is like, not good for a lot of people working long hours being away from home. Even when you're adopting a pet, a lot of the time, the criteria is like this dog would do better with someone who's home all the time. But like, even they're trying to kind of like, place the animal in sort of like a home where they have companionship constantly. Then in that situation like reorienting our lives to be a home, where present more would be better if you choose to have an animal companion.

Amanda

Oh, definitely. And it's so true that I think the way that Western society at least is structured right now is just not healthy. No, not at all.

Olivia

Like being outside or in a quiet environment with your animal, you know, that's like working outside or the animal can like, hang out with you while you're doing tasks. That would be like my perfect scenario or something. But I know that's really not how our society is now.

Amanda

Do you see that as a potential for your future?

Olivia

Well, maybe. Hopefully, that would be nice. In an ideal world, well, okay, so one of the funniest, like a decade ago, I worked on a farm in Norway and the farmer couple, they're really young, and they had a baby. And we were having to make hay, which was like really grueling, where you have to kind of like rake the hay and turn it over so it dries properly. And the little baby had its own old rake and was raking besides mom, and then she would pick up the baby and breastfeed it. And I'm like, this is perfect. I mean, it was really hard work, but at least the baby like had something to do as well. And like was feeling like it was being fulfilled and like productive. But for me, that would be something that I would like to have an outside space to do things.

Amanda

I feel like you could definitely have that. Especially having like experienced that kind of in a previous time in your life and knowing that it's possible

Olivia

Yeah, just you know, put my little future baby down in the dirt while I garden or something and it can pretend to do something, or just explore would be nice, because I was a TV kid. So I was like, glued to the TV throughout my whole childhood. I mean, it didn't hurt me. I think if I had an option to do outside things, I would have done them more.

Transcription of sound piece:

Meet the animal practitioners. There was a bed. If one were to look closely, there was a woman lying very still. She'd been there all day. The vertical had held her bed bound. If she moved, the bear room would start spinning, her head being the horrible little axis. There are many people like her forgotten in their beds. In the morning, Dara would go to Gateway, a 10 day all inclusive retreat in the mountains, where guests and the animal practitioners would be narrowly linked. She had read about it on a cork board outside her local health club. The Retreat use ancient technologies, animals, and the animals had their own ancient technology, the talent of intuition. The flyer had explained intuition as the information stored and passed on through genetic memory. The Gateway treatment would allow them to train it and bring it forward to their conscious minds. She sometimes felt the old talent in her it took on simple missions. When she walked past the food aisle looking at the rows of produce, intuition guided her on what to make for dinner. Her body reacted strongly when she passed eggplants, or

pineapples, or most kinds of cheeses, or to pick up her pace when a shadowy figure appeared in her periphery. Dara appreciated these gentle internal nudges, but she wanted to call back to it and engage it in a deeper conversation. The Talon Kandra Dara as a genderless voice that would guide her through the do's and don'ts of life. The next day, Dara stood near the opening of the gateway barn, a large stone structure that houses the practitioners trying to fit herself into a patch of shade. The door to the barn was shut, but the late afternoon air was filled with smells of their hot manure. It was the time of day when the birds and insects seemed a little lethargic. Though Libby, the owner of the retreat. Welcome to the guests energetically. Animals are intuitive, Libby explained. She was an older woman, gray hair, serious eyes. Spiritual. People believe that animals are less important than humans in every way. Dara had learned about animals from a radio program she listened to, but like most people had never been around one. Animals connect directly. Libby continued without all the barriers that humans invent that get in the way of Li F E. She paused. Love is finite expressed a guest recited. Dara nodded. She had her own acronym, M U P. S medically unexplained physical symptoms. That was her diagnosis or lack thereof, depending on who you asked. Her health matters remain mysterious and unexplained. Like intuition. This phenomenon went back generations in her family. Something was wrong with how her body was communicating. The information seemed to spread out on the wrong channels and delivered bad messages. The messages came out as vague symptoms, swollen lymph nodes hives pain, sludgy exhaustion. Dara suspected many of the symptoms were from being bombarded daily with modern day conveniences, 5q, plastics, GMOs, conveniences that were Geno toxic. She wanted to ask Libby if the treatment would help with such health anomalies or genetic pollutants through greater communion with her genderless voice. Your animal will ask you to open yourself to connection, play, walk talk, invite their counsel Libby strode over to the barn and unlatch the door. Time to meet the animal practitioners. Eight horses three dogs, two cats and two cows step forward. Each animal was assigned with their special attributes, kind, patient, strong voice, gentle demeanor, sensitive, soulful. Dara waited and watched as the other guests were chosen and linked. This one linked With a sensitive horse, that one linked with a patient cat, another one linked with a soulful dog. A cow move towards her. It's signed red. Empathic. Dara walked to the cow in the link was made.

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