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An Oral History of The Electrical Eggs: Science Fiction, Disability Activism, and Fan Conventions

Une histoire orale des *Electrical Eggs* : science-fiction, activisme pour les personnes handicapées et conventions de fans

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Abstract
Before the Americans with Disabilities Act was enacted in 1990, American science fiction fans in southern states organized, collaborated, and practiced accessibility at conventions. This grassroots movement began with the work of Samanda B. Jeude and a coalition of other science fiction fans who fought for visibility and access to convention spaces. In this oral history of their organization, "The Electrical Eggs," I interview two key members decades after their participation in making conventions accessible. I complement these oral sources with brief histories of the role of eugenics and ableism in science fiction and the rise of disability activism in America. Although, the science fiction fandom still faces historical forces like ableism that have been present since its beginnings, the work of the Eggs is a testament to the power of collective action to provide accessibility in fan communities.

Before the Americans with Disabilities Act was enacted in 1990, American science fiction fans in southern states organized, collaborated, and practiced accessibility at conventions. This grassroots movement began with the work of Samanda B. Jeude and a coalition of other science fiction fans who fought for visibility and access to convention spaces. In this oral history of their organization, "The Electrical Eggs," I interview two key members decades after their participation in making conventions accessible. I complement these oral sources with brief histories of the role of eugenics and ableism in science fiction and the rise of disability activism in America. Although, the science fiction fandom still faces historical forces like ableism that have been present since its beginnings, the work of the Eggs is a testament to the power of collective action to provide accessibility in fan communities.

Résumé
Avant l'adoption de la loi américaine sur les personnes handicapées (*Americans with Disabilities Act*) en 1990, des adeptes de science-fiction originaires des États du sud des États-Unis se sont mobilisés, ont collaboré et ont mis en œuvre des pratiques d'accessibilité lors des conventions. Ce mouvement populaire a émergé grâce à l'engagement de Samanda B. Jeude et d'une coalition de personnes passionnées de

science-fiction qui ont milité pour une meilleure visibilité et un accès équitable aux lieux accueillant ces évènements. Dans cette histoire orale consacrée à leur organisation, *The Electrical Eggs*, j'interviewe deux membres clés, plusieurs décennies après leur implication dans l'amélioration de l'accessibilité des conventions. Leurs témoignages sont enrichis par des éclairages historiques sur l'influence de l'eugénisme et du capacitisme dans la science-fiction, ainsi que sur l'essor de l'activisme en faveur des droits des personnes handicapées aux États-Unis. Bien que la communauté des adeptes de science-fiction soit encore confrontée à des dynamiques historiques telles que le capacitisme, enracinées depuis ses origines, le travail des *Eggs* illustre la force de l'action collective pour faire progresser l'accessibilité au sein des communautés d'adeptes.

Keywords
Disability; Activism; Accessibility; Fandom; Science fiction fans

Mots-clés
Handicap; activisme; accessibilité; communauté d'adeptes; adeptes de science-fiction

Introduction

“Since I was a child, I’ve been around people who were disabled, didn’t think anything about it, you know,” Marilyn Teague tells me, reflecting on her childhood.[1] At 74, she speaks to me about her lifelong passion for *Star Trek* and fan conventions. However, before talking about *Star Trek*, she mentions “Uncle Marky,” her father’s best friend. As a child, she would watch her father pick him up in his car, carrying his friend into the passenger seat, and folding the wheelchair for the back seat. “I think he had polio,” she reasons. “He was a wheelchair user and it impressed me that my dad was strong enough to pick up this man and transfer him from his wheelchair to the front seat of Dad’s car.” She suspects they met in the army. Without fail, Marilyn’s father drove his friend to work every day. Marilyn’s father worked in the barber shop in front of Uncle Marky’s tailor shop. “I mean, it didn’t occur to me that this man was disabled. He was just Uncle Marky to me, you know,” Marilyn mentions, revealing how disability has appeared throughout her life.[2]

By the 1950s, polio, if that is what Uncle Marky had survived, had receded thanks to a robust public health campaign across North America. When he was younger, polio epidemics were a real concern. In 1916, in New York City alone, there were 8,900 cases

[1] For the most part, this article when referring to individuals follows the convention of using their full name upon introduction, and last name subsequently. However, for key individuals, I will use their first name after introducing them. This includes interviewees, and individuals critical to the oral history who have agency in changing their surroundings. This is to highlight the humanity of those involved.
[2] In conversation with Marilyn Teague on February 8, 2023.

and 2,400 fatalities.[3] After the Sable and Sabin vaccines were available starting in the 1950s and 1960s, polio cases plummeted.[4] In 1952, there were 57,879 cases in America. By 1970, there were only 33.[5] However, for many polio survivors, the scars of the disease remained. Many lived with mobility issues, using wheelchairs. They returned from hospitals and polio centres, finding a world not designed for them.[6] Marilyn’s uncle, Uncle Marky, might have been one of them.

Still, the world of the 1950s was not built for wheelchair use even if Uncle Marky was not a survivor of polio. Marilyn’s memories of Uncle Marky hold special weight, considering how disability has been present throughout her life. At 74, with certain health issues, she herself uses a wheelchair, due to the amputation of her leg. She excitedly tells me how the prosthetic leg she will soon have can have a picture on it. “I said, okay, I want Nichelle Nichols. I want Uhura on my prosthetic leg,” she says. “I think it’s gonna be so cool walking in Dragon Con with a prosthetic leg with Lieutenant Uhura on it. I’ve already got the photograph.” She smiles over our Zoom call.[7]

For Marilyn, the prosthetic leg is a unique expression of not only her fan identity, but also her crip identity. Crip identity is a complex concept, unique to anyone experiencing their disability. The lived experience of disability is expansively complicated. Part of crip

[3] J. K. Silver and Daniel J. Wilson, *Polio Voices: An Oral History from the American Polio Epidemics and Worldwide Eradication Efforts*, The Praeger Series on Contemporary Health and Living (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2007), 2.
[4] Nidia H. De Jesus, “Epidemics to Eradication: The Modern History of Poliomyelitis,” *Virology Journal* 4 (July 10, 2007): 70-70, https://doi.org/10.1186/1743-422X-4-70.
[5] Silver and Wilson, *Polio Voices*, 5.
[6] Ibid., 75.
[7] In conversation with Marilyn Teague on February 8, 2023.

identity is pride, but deeper down, disabled scholars, activists, and individuals ask questions of their disabilities and the looming forces that oppress them. For disability writer Alison Kafer, crip is "a word, an orientation, an affiliation, a feeling."[8] Kafer argues that crip is constantly in negotiation, interrogating concepts like time, innocence, and simultaneity.[9] Scholar Mel Chen draws connections to trans studies when claiming that disabled persons "are all *becoming*…"[10] More than anything, I want to highlight how my interviewees, through their lived experiences, challenge oppressive norms concerning their disability, crafting instead a place for themselves within a larger community. Marilyn lives in Georgia, and my other interviewee, Marcia Illingworth, lives in Tennessee. They primarily attend conventions in the United States, although this article will touch on historical forces, such as eugenics, that permeated North America at large. Marilyn, Marcia, and their partners in disability activism attended American conventions, such as Dragon Con, Worldcon, and Chilicon, among many others.

Lieutenant Uhura, one of pop culture's most enduring icons of Black feminist power, is displayed on Marilyn's prosthetic leg, a marker of agency. As I will explore in this article, the two are related for disabled fans like Marilyn, if not intertwined. I argue that although science fiction as a genre began with a problematic relationship with disability, disabled science fiction fans regardless exerted personal agency to become pillars of their community.

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[8] Alison Kafer, "After Crip, Crip Afters," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 120, no. 2 (April 1, 2021): 415, https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-8916158.
[9] Kafer, 416-419.
[10] Mel Chen, "Brain Fog: The Race for Cripistemology," *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 8, no. 2 (January 2014): 178, https://doi.org/10.3828/jlcds.2014.14.

This is an oral history of the disability activist organization that Marilyn once belonged to: The Electrical Eggs. Initially begun to support disabled fans at a science fiction convention, Eggs soon expanded to provide accessibility services across the United States and the United Kingdom in the 1980s and 1990s, predating the Americans With Disability Act of 1991. I utilize two oral sources for this history: Marilyn Teague and her associate and friend Marcia Illingworth. I conducted these interviews over Zoom and Skype in 2023. I draw upon oral history conventions to make their histories come alive through narrative retellings. I often use evocative language to convey the liveliness of my conversations with Marilyn and Marcia. This is directly in line with the work of oral historians, such as Steven High in *Oral History at the Crossroads: Sharing Life Stories of Survival and Displacement,* emphasizing how I am “sharing authority” with my interviewees. In “sharing authority,” an oral historian collaborates with their subject, in this way having a working relationship that is founded on trust.11 In my inclusion of their stories, I endeavour to showcase the humanity of my interviewees, having them transcend mere sources to be human beings with lived experiences who shared their stories with me. In this way, I share authority with them. Overall, Eggs accomplished disability justice through a grass roots movement founded on relationships centred around science fiction fandom. Before sharing the stories of Marilyn and Marcia, it is necessary to establish the context of disability within science fiction culture, and how Eggs built on pre-existing

[11] Steven C. High, *Oral History at the Crossroads: Sharing Life Stories of Survival and Displacement*, Shared, Oral & Public History Series (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014), 7-10.

disability activism as a response to prevalent ableism in science fiction culture. I turn next to the genesis of ableism in science fiction stories.

The origins of disability and eugenics in science fiction

Disability existed within science fiction since the beginning of the genre. In the pages of *Amazing Stories*, one of the earliest periodicals devoted to the genre, disability, illness, and madness are common tropes. Medicine and technology often overcome sensory disabilities, which are merely obstacles. One 1942 editorial showcased a device by the American Foundation for the Blind. "When the blind person comes near the building, his body cuts a light beam focused on an electrical eye. A photo-electric cell detects this and an electrical relay is operated to start an automatic speaker which" plays a message.[12] In other words: there was little in the way of humanizing the blind experience. Science could cure it.

In 1930's "Flamingo: A Drama of AD 1950," Clarence Edward Heller depicted a future where robots have replaced human entertainers. In one performance, there is assistive technology for the Deaf. "From the Deaf section, in which those, who were so unfortunate to be deprived of hearing, were seated, the cut-in waves of sound, from the Arboreal Hearograph, a peculiar sponge-like contrivance, that hung, suspended, overhead, rendered each one's affliction neutral." A "Spectrumscope" replicated "extinct retina images" for the blind, allowing them to see the show.[13] "Flamingo: A Drama of 1950"

[12] B. G. Davis, "The Observatory by the Editor," *Amazing Stories,* December 1942, 192.
[13] Clarence Edward Heller, "Flamingo: A Drama of A. D. 1950," *Amazing Stories,* July 1930, 327-8.

leverages the lived experience of the blind and Deaf to illustrate the advancements of its speculative society. What is absent is any point of view of someone blind or deaf who has used assistive technology.

The story of disability in the pages of *Amazing Stories* is really the story of eugenics. Eugenics is widely known as a dark chapter in science history, but not fully understood. For the purposes of my exploration of disability in early science fiction, it is necessary to contextualize the contemporary scientific movement of eugenics. A Victorian scientist, Sir Francis Galton, coined the term "eugenics" after reading his cousin Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species*. He believed that selective breeding, as one would breed dogs, horses, or vegetables, lay at the key of humanity's progress.[14] Galton argued that, if one were to look, a famous man's male relatives were more likely to carry shared exceptional traits. He did not include women in his analysis.[15] Galton believed a utopia could be reached, so long as western civilization "produce[d] a highly-gifted race of men by judicious marriages during several consecutive generations."[16] How "advanced" a civilization was correlated to the advancements of a race. "Civilization is the necessary fruit of high intelligence when found in a social animal," he wrote in his 1892 book *Hereditary Genius: An Inquiry Into Its Laws and Consequences,* "and there is no plainer lesson to be read off the face of Nature than the result of the operation of her laws is to evoke intelligence in connexion with

[14] N. W. Gillham, "Sir Francis Galton and the Birth of Eugenics," *Annual Review of Genetics* 35 (2001): 83, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.genet.35.102401.090055. Galton also coined the phrase "nature vs. nurture," ascribing traits to the former, not the latter.
[15] Gillham, 87-8.
[16] Galton, xxvii, 1.

sociability.”[17] Inherently founding his conception of eugenics was the idea that certain races were better than others. He wrote, “If we could raise the average standard of our race only one grade, what vast changes would be produced!”[18] Galton crafted eugenics as a racist practice of science that categorized people according to their traits, labelled by grade.

Contemporary conceptions of eugenics are present in this era of science fiction. Eugenics elides the disabled experience in these stories. In the 1935 space opera, “The Contests of the Planets,” the author described the colonization of Mars. “The planets have, for nearly seven centuries, through thirty generations of men, robbed earth of her greatest heritage, the near-geniuses. We have accepted only the strong, the intelligent and healthy.” The issue is that “Generation after generation we have taken from earth everything that makes the human race strong, we have left only the dregs, the weak, the stupid, the unadventurous, and—the contented.”[19] Although not specifically about disability, the author wrote with eugenic principles in mind. Colonizing Mars took the best of humanity, leaving behind inferior people to populate earth. Conquering Mars comes at the cost of propagating weaker humans on earth.

Science based on eugenics ideas also had a place for the disabled, albeit limited. Disability existed as an obstacle for science to conquer. In 1934’s “Life Everlasting,” an asthmatic woman lives a miserable life in a stunted body. She joins an experimental serum treatment with three others. As the author put it, the astonishing serum makes her “the

[17] Galton, 336.
[18] Galton, 343.
[19] John W. Campbell Jr., “The Contests of the Planets,” *Amazing Stories,* January 1935, 21.

first of a new race.”[20] The serum also fixes other deviance. Doctors test the drug on “criminals, abnormals, and defectives” who would otherwise waste away on dwindling state resources.[21] The head doctor’s ethos is that “a bad man is simply a sick man.”[22] A diseased body, then, is a malevolent body. A doctor can save it, though, with modern medicine. After all, this fictional serum is just the next step in the human race’s evolution. The future should have no disability or deviance.

The most blatant connection with disability and race is in “The Black Hand,” a story published in January 1931. An artist needs his arm amputated. He bemoans, “But what’s a stump to an artist? Fingers and hands are what he needs.”[23] His surgeon proposes a risky alternative: graft the arm of a “negro” convict onto the artist’s shoulder. The artist briefly considers the stigma attached to having black skin. But the desperation to not be disabled overwhelms him, and he agrees to the surgery. Despite all odds, it is a success. The narrator proclaims, “Two weeks later and the arm was healing rapidly. Two years later and complete sensation had returned. Five years later and the black hand was painting masterpieces….”[24] The artist is even more successful with a black arm. However, the artist soon descends into homicidal madness and paranoia. After mayhem and murder, the authorities lock him up. The story concludes with a psychiatric report: “A patient with a negative psychiatric history became criminally insane following a graft of a negro’s arm,

[20] David H. Keller M. D., “Life Everlasting,” *Amazing Stories,* July 1934, 15.
[21] Keller, 30.
[22] Ibid., 29.
[23] Ibid., 909.
[24] Ibid., 923.

although the operation was a physical and physiological success."[25] This story highlights the intertwining history ableism and racism share.

Disability is a common topic in the pages of *Amazing Stories*. In truth, there is little space for disability or non-white people in the periodical's vision for the future. Its narrative of progress erases the experiences of millions, covering them up and leaving behind the less desirable aspects of humanity. The emerging genre of science fiction painted in bold colours a future where the farthest star is humanity's conceived limits. But it was a future that was white, male, and non-disabled. This directly reflects contemporary ideas about disability and race.

Nativism and eugenics in North America discriminated against the disabled and non-white people seeking refuge on the continent. As disability scholar Jay Dolmage argues, "Immigration has never been about immigration."[26] A border may be a constructed idea, but as a rhetorical strategy, it aims to restrict people's movements, and simultaneously disable and racialize their bodies. As Dolmage puts it, immigration restriction "reaches into and rearranges bodies, violently."[27] However, this did not completely stop disabled immigrants. Many Deaf immigrants at the turn of the century still managed to settle in America, forming their own communities, despite rampant discrimination and oralism in their new homes.[28]

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[25] Ibid., 923.
[26] Jay Dolmage, *Disabled upon Arrival: Eugenics, Immigration, and the Construction of Race and Disability* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2018), 1.
[27] Dolmage, *Disabled Upon Arrival*, 1.
[28] Joseph J Murray, "Transnational Interconnections in Nineteenth-Century Western Deaf Communities" in *The Oxford Handbook of Disability History,* edited by Michael Rembis, Catherine Kudlick, and Kim E. Nielsen (Oxford University Press, 2018), 432.

As *Amazing Stories* began publication in 1926, governments on either side of the Atlantic promoted eugenic policies. Many states in the US and the provinces of Alberta and British Columbia in Canada embarked on sterilization campaigns in the name of public health. The eugenics ideology was ostensibly about healthy living. However, more extremely, the eugenics movement fought to ensure that more “fit” individuals produced children, while “undesirables” did not.[29] As disability scholars have argued, “Underneath such ‘progressive’ goals lay solidly-entrenched patterns of structured social inequality and equally pervasive racist and sexist attitudes and beliefs.”[30] Fundamentally, a medicalization of social problems reinforced eugenics ideas as to how to grow a healthy population.[31] The history of eugenics directly troubles the idea that scientific thinking has only ever been “progressive.” Not long ago, educated people believed that the best thing for humanity was selective breeding, including the practice of involuntary sterilization. As a result of the efforts of the previously discussed Charles B. Davenport, eugenicists instigated the sterilization of more than 65,000 people in America.[32]

The start of the Cold War post-World War II shifted the conversation in the genre away from turn of the century scientific ideas. With the fear of communism came science fiction writing that highlighted anxieties surrounding infiltration from foreign influences.[33]

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[29] Jana Grekul, Arvey Krahn, and Dave Odynak, “Sterilizing the ‘Feeble-Minded’: Eugenics in Alberta, Canada, 1929–1972,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 17, no. 4 (2004): 358, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6443.2004.00237.x.
[30] Grekul, Krahn, and Odynak, “Sterilizing the Feeble-Minded,” 359.
[31] Ibid., 360.
[32] Susan McKinnon, “The American Eugenics Record Office: Technologies for Terminating ‘Degenerate’ Family Lines and Purifying the Nation,” *Social Analysis* 65, no. 4 (December 1, 2021): 45, https://doi.org/10.3167/sa.2021.650402.
[33] Mark Bould and Sherryl Vint, *The Routledge Concise History of Science Fiction*, 1st ed (London ; New York: Routledge, 2011), 82.

However, I aim to highlight how foundational ableist ideas were to science fiction. While the world healed after the Second World War, disabled activists formed communities and challenged the ableist status quo. Next, I explore the foundational history of disability activism in America.

Disability activism in America from 1960-2022

The disability movement of the twentieth century was not the first example of disability activism. Disabled activism stretches as far back as the mid-19th century in industrial Britain.[34] Disabled activists have fought for better accessibility in society. Policies for the disabled in the twentieth century were founded on ableist definitions. Policy often rendered the disabled invisible.[35] Disabled activists have faced many obstacles in their fight for equality.

Starting in the mid-19th century, North American bureaucracies changed definitions of disability alongside evolving morality and politics.[36] Historians have demonstrated that policy-makers weaponized this rhetoric to deny citizenship to marginalized people.[37] Policy sought to remove inclusion, not provide it. Prior to the 1970s, the US did not offer any

[34] David M. Turner and Daniel Blackie, “Disability and Political Activism in Industrialising Britain, c. 1830–1850,” *Social History* 47, no. 2 (April 3, 2022): 117–40, https://doi.org/10.1080/03071022.2022.2044202.
[35] Neil Dhingra and Joel Miller, “Dependent Rational Activists: Disability, Student Activism, and Special Education,” *Philosophical Inquiry in Education* 28, no. 2 (2021): 111, https://doi.org/10.7202/1082919ar.
[36] Dhingra and Miller, “Dependent Rational Activists,” 113.
[37] Ibid., 111.

federal services for disabled students.[38] Nationally, the American context lacked policy to combat ableist discrimination.

American policy changed in the 1970s. In 1971, the United Nations published the Declaration on the Rights of Mentally Retarded Persons, and the Declaration on the Rights of the Disabled Person in 1975.[39] American discourse on disability shifted. Richard Nixon signed the Rehabilitation Act in 1973.[40] A colossal effort on the part of disabled activists precipitated Nixon’s signature. The disability movement emerged from a transnational impulse, where European and American activists argued that disability was not a tragedy suffered alone. Rather, it constituted “a collective identity of a marginalized community struggling for equality and full citizenship.”[41] Fundamentally, activists sought to challenge medical authority, instead advocating for the lived experience of the disabled for expertise. Disabled activists worked alongside other movements. They echoed the cries of the Youth Movement of 1968. The Peace Movement decried the needlessness of war in causing disability. Both the women’s movement and the US Civil Rights movement also advocated for the powerless.[42] The disability movement held its own, fighting for equality along intersectional lines.

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[38]Ibid., 111.
[39] Monika Baar, “Seeking Inclusion through Redefining Expertise: The Changing Spatial Contours of Disability Activism in the Long 1970s,” *European Review of History: Revue Européenne d’histoire* 29, no. 3 (May 4, 2022): 452–68, https://doi.org/10.1080/13507486.2021.2019685,454.
[40] Emily Rose Gordon, “Wheels of Injustice: How Medical Schools Retained the Power to Discriminate Against Applicants in Wheelchairs in the Era of Disability Rights,” *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 77, no. 4 (November 13, 2022): 460, https://doi.org/10.1093/jhmas/jrac028.
[41] Baar, “Seeking Inclusion through Redefining Expertise,” 453.
[42]Ibid., 454.

The disability movement sprung from a growing, shared consciousness. Independent living centres across the country provided resources for the disabled, although the first notable centre was in Berkeley, founded in 1972. Run by and for the disabled, they argued that disability expertise ought to be centred on the lived experience, not by political bias. They advocated turning disability from something shameful into something admirable.[43] A flashpoint for discrimination was in medical schools. Effectively, medical school admissions across the country denied acceptance for disabled students, citing a perceived inability to practice medicine.[44] Disabled medical students demonstrated their capabilities in studying medicine, proving the universities wrong.[45] Many activists emerged from rehabilitation centres and summer camps, having solidified their identities for activist work.[46] When the Rehabilitation Act failed to live up to its promises, these activists protested.[47] Institutions, both local and federal, wrung their hands over the financial cost of implementing the Act. In 1977, activists staged sit-ins and protested in San Francisco and Washington D.C. It worked. Section 504, the key part of the Act, went into effect.[48] As Lindsey Patterson argues, the disability movement was truly a grassroots movement, emerging from these centres, camps, and living centres.[49] Lived experiences mattered.

[43] Ibid., 457-8.
[44] Gordon, “Wheels of Injustice,” 453.
[45]Ibid., 459.
[46] L. Patterson, “Points of Access: Rehabilitation Centers, Summer Camps, and Student Life in the Making of Disability Activism, 1960-1973,” *Journal of Social History* 46, no. 2 (December 1, 2012): 473–99, https://doi.org/10.1093/jsh/shs099.
[47] Patterson, “Points of Access,” 474.
[48] Gordon, “Wheels of Injustice.”, 460.
[49] Patterson, “Points of Access.”, 474.

After the successes of the 1970s, the legacy of the disability movement is far from perfect. Critics cited how the founders were often of privilege, being straight and white. Additionally, earlier activists tended to be wheelchair-using men, far from being a complete picture of the wide diversity within the disabled community. Scholars have argued that this lacking representation only reinforced stigmatization of other disabled people, such as the mentally disabled.[50] Still, disabled activists continued fighting in the 1980s on issues such as independent living and equal legal treatment.[51] In 1990, George H. W. Bush signed the Americans with Disabilities Act into law. However, the ADA did not bestow rights to the disabled overnight. As with every previous step forward, institutions pushed back. Universities, hospitals, and governments worked to pay the least amount of money to adhere to the law. Even though Bush signed the ADA into law in 1990, the ADA's provisions only came into effect in 1994.[52]

The ADA is founded on ableist attitudes, just like policy a hundred years previous. The ADA found mixed success within its first five years. Only 41% of Americans and 40% of disabled persons knew of it and how it could help.[53] The makers of the ADA carefully crafted policy to promote endless work.[54] Absent is a consideration of whether everyone can or should work. Additionally, for Mad people and those needing everyday assistance, the ADA only offers gaps.[55] Despite the tireless work of activists, the American government

[50] Baar, "Seeking Inclusion through Redefining Expertise.", 464.
[51] Gordon, "Wheels of Injustice,"468.
[52] Gordon, "Wheels of Injustice," 468-9.
[53] Jane West, "Introduction," in *Implementing The Americans With Disability Act* edited by Jane West (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), xviii-xix.
[54] Ibid., xxv.
[55] Ibid., xxx-xxxi.

has yet to provide a cure for ableism. When fans like Marilyn started attending conventions in the late 1960s, there were few accessibility options for disabled fans.

My interviewees: Marilyn and Marcia encounter *Star Trek*

Both of my interviewees for this article express fond memories of growing up with science fiction. Marilyn promptly recalls the premiere of *Star Trek*. “September the 8th, 1966, if you need to know,” she says. “My gosh, you know, *Star Trek* changed my life.”[56] After turning 19 in the late 1960s, Marilyn began participating in fandom. She often watched science fiction and horror on television with her father. She was not much of a reader, preferring television and film. Marilyn and her father were fond of the gruesome British Hammer Horror genre of films, spending long nights in front of the television, drinking hot chocolate. When Marilyn graduated high school, she read an announcement in the newspaper. “The fact is, you know, I got hooked on fandom right out of high school,” she recalls. The announcement advertised a science fiction fan meeting in Downtown Atlanta. Once a month, she attended, beginning her lifelong relationship with fandom.[57] Marcia Illingworth, my other interviewee, shares similar feelings. Marcia’s father introduced her to science fiction. “My father was a chemist,” she explains. “He had a PhD in physical chemistry.” This special connection echoes Marilyn’s relationship with her father, bonding over evening viewings of *Star Trek*. Science fiction was a family event for Marcia. Every week, her family watched Star Trek on the family television in her parents’ room. When Stanley Kubrick’s “2001: A

[56] In conversation with Marilyn Teague on February 8, 2023.
[57] In conversation with Marilyn Teague on February 8, 2023.

Space Odyssey” premiered, the whole family saw it. Marilyn and Marcia’s familial relationships incited their lifelong participation with science fiction fan community.

As Marilyn and Marcia graduated high school, they began a life-long journey into fandom, watching *Star Trek’s* premiere on television and experiencing one of their country’s most charged decades. Journalist Frye Gallard describes the 1960s as having “a sense of a steady unfolding of time, as if history were on a forced march, and the changes spread to every corner of our lives.”[58] Rock n’ roll sounded a rebel cry for the youth. Civil rights leaders Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr. fought for equality. Meanwhile, Americans looked to the stars with the untold possibilities of space exploration. The 1960s inherited both a sense of unbounded hope, and a complacency from the 1950s.[59] Just in the year *Star Trek* premiered, civil rights activists coined the phrase “Black Power” during a march to Jackson, Mississippi.[60] In light of Malcolm X’s teachings, a nascent Black nationalism advocated for Black community building.[61] Betty Friedan founded NOW, the National Organization of Women, which fought for, among other things, equal pay, child care, and maternity leave.[62] Ideas of gender radically changed with the “sexual revolution,” fundamentally shifting how America thought of female sexuality.[63] Marilyn and Marcia, like

[58] Frye Gaillard, *A Hard Rain: America in the 1960s, Our Decade of Hope, Possibility, and Innocence Lost* (Montgomery: NewSouth Books, 2018), xi.
[59] Gaillard, “A Hard Rain,” xv.
[60] Ibid., 319-322.
[61] Russell Rickford, “‘We Can’t Grow Food on All This Concrete’: The Land Question, Agrarianism, and Black Nationalist Thought in the Late 1960s and 1970s,” *Journal of American History* 103, no. 4 (March 1, 2017): 956, https://doi.org/10.1093/jahist/jaw506.
[62] Gallard, “A Hard Rain,” 353-54.
[63] Leslie Paris, “The Sexual Clock: Middle-Aged American Women and Sexual Vitality in the 1960s and 1970s,” *Journal of Social History* 53, no. 4 (June 1, 2020): 922–38, https://doi.org/10.1093/jsh/shz046.

others sitting in front of their television sets, witnessed a shiny future in the 79 episodes of the original *Star Trek* series, a vision of tomorrow squarely informed by present dreams.

Both of my interviewees met their partners in these fan circles. Once again, Marilyn and Marcia’s relationships constituted their involvement with fandom. Marilyn’s husband, Robert, was a big reader. “He brought all his books with him,” Marilyn describes living with her husband. Meanwhile, Marilyn brought all her videotapes to their home. She talks affectionately about her deceased husband, reflecting on many happy memories of sharing in fandom. Their wedding topped any fan affair. “It was a *Star Trek* wedding,” she tells me, grinning. “We had *Star Trek* dresses, uniforms” styled after costumes from *Star Trek: Wrath of Khan*. Their son was dressed as the cybernetically enhanced character Geordi. The costumes were handmade. “It was super dynamic,” she says.[64] Marcia now, as she was in the 80s, also lives and breathes fandom. She met her husband through the fan community. They dated Transatlantic for five years, marrying in 1997. They met while volunteering for The Electrical Eggs, a fandom accessibility organization that predated the ADA.[65]

Marilyn and Marcia Join The Electrical Eggs

Marilyn and Robert attended many conventions, building a network of friends and colleagues passionate about science fiction. Robert initially introduced Marilyn to Samanda B. Jeude. “I don’t know when they first met,” Marilyn says. “I don’t know why it

[64] In conversation with Marilyn Teague on February 8, 2023.
[65] In conversation with Marcia Illingworth on March 22, 2023.

never occurred to me to ask, but he just says I want you to meet somebody."[66] Samanda was a polio survivor. She used a scooter to move at cons. Beyond her affable rapport with friends, Samanda held strong ideals. "She was a force of nature," describes Marcia, one of her dearest friends. "When she was your friend, she was your friend. Lord help anybody who ever crossed you, 'cause that little tiny polio-ridden body could carry gossip." She drew a notable profile, with her flaming red hair, and her scooter.[67] Samanda had a bold vision for the disabled community in fandom.

The name Electrical Eggs is an inside joke. Samanda once described her scooter as her "electrical legs" to a fan who asked. The fan misunderstood her, and thought she said "electrical eggs." Samanda kept it in mind when naming her organization. Marilyn remembers thinking the name was "kind of cute and catchy." Eggs members each had their own names. "We were considered carton members. Like, you know, egg cartons," Marilyn explains. Samanda was the egghead. Marcia was medeggal (she was a paramedic). Marilyn's maiden name was White, so they called her egg white. Samanda called Robert eggbeater, so Marilyn and Robert's couple name was meringue, as beating eggs is how to make meringue.[68] Samanda keenly had an aptitude for community and relationship building when founding her organization.

Born in 1952, Samanda lived a long life, proving her doctors wrong. She passed away in 2022, before I started conducting interviews. Before passing away, she explained on the record her life story. "When I was seven…I overheard my parents talking with the

[66] In conversation with Marilyn Teague on February 8, 2023.
[67] In conversation with Marcia Illingworth on March 22, 2023.
[68] In conversation with Marilyn Teague on February 8, 2023.

doctor,” she wrote. “…and the doctor said, well, let’s be realistic. No man is going to want to marry her, her body is twisted, it’s distorted, it’s ugly. She will never reach thirty, she will probably be on a body board by the time she would be in high school.”[69] Despite the severity of her case, she worked hard “to achieve her goal of independence.”[70] In college, she fell in love with science fiction, voraciously reading any book she could find. She soon found her community. She later wrote, “somebody said, why don’t you come to a con with us. OK, fine, I’ll go to a con with you. What’s to lose? This was back in the good old days when you could get in for five bucks….I think there were fifteen of us in the room. We walked into what was Rivercon I (1975).”[71]

Samanda still lived with post-polio syndrome. “I got thrown into a [motorized] three-wheeler. And three weeks later we went to Rivercon.”[72] Still, cons could be more accessible. She was not the only one to think that. In a discussion with Esther Breslau, another polio survivor, they “were really ticked off that Baltimore” was insufficient in terms of accessibility.[73] They brainstormed. In 1985, Samanda and Esther drew up guidelines for accessibility at conventions. They tested them at southern conventions, such as Chilicon and LoneStarCon. Additionally at the 1986 Worldcon, the big convention where the Hugos are awarded, they tested out accessibility services. They soon secured funding for the organization. Samanda drew up The Eggs’ charter in 1986. She wrote the handbook in

[69] Mike Glyer, “Obituary: Samanda B Jeude (b.1952),” *Scientifiction* edited by John L. Coker III, Third Quarter, 2022.
[70] Glyer, “Obituary.”
[71] Ibid.
[72] Rivercon, an offshoot of DeepSouthCon, was a convention held in Lousiville, Kentucky from 1975 to 2000. “Rivercon - Fancyclopedia 3,” accessed May 1, 2023, https://fancyclopedia.org/Rivercon.
[73] Glyer, “Obituary.”

1985, with a revision in 1989. The Electrical Eggs established a British chapter, spreading across the Atlantic in 1995. The British chapter debuted in Glasgow at Intersection. The Eggs are exceptional for being vanguards in disability activist history. As someone told her on the suitability of the name: "Eggs are one of the strongest structures in nature, and yet it is very fragile. Perfect name for the organization."[74]

Samanda also published about disability. In the 1986 Worldcon program book, she penned a guide, titled "They Only Handicap the Best Horses," for how to act towards disabled fans. "You say you've never met an 'alien' before, and you aren't sure how to react?" She wrote, "In a way, you have: the woman who shambles like something out of Lovecraft, folk with 'jitterbugging' eyes, the man who stares at your mouth. Normally, they're called 'Handicapped,' and they – we – have protocols as alien to 'normal' folks as the current fashions on Sirius 7."[75] Samanda writes a profound declaration of crip identity, a radical acceptance of the disabled experience in the trappings of science fiction. The "shambling" folk that Samanda described would fit right in with the negative depictions of aberrant bodies previously discussed in *Amazing Stories*. Samanda can clearly identify the ableism that has been present since the dawn of science fiction. Weird bodily motions are not the hallmark of an alien species; rather, they are the signifier of what Samanda would call "handicapped" experience. However, she flips the point of view to reside in the alien creatures that are disabled fans. In this way, rather than aberrant physicality or mentality characterizing something strange, Samanda situates the hero of the story with them. After

[74] Glyer.
[75] Samanda B. Jeude, "They Only Handicap the Best Horses," *Confederation: 44th World Science Fiction Convention,* August 28 – September 1, 1986, 78.

all, her title explains her viewpoint: “They Only Handicap the Best Horses.” Rather than science curing the blind, or replacing amputated arms, the disabled are unique and important in their experience.

She speaks to common sentiments still trotted out today. “Don’t treat us like idiots,” “if you want to help, offer,” and “don’t look away when you talk to us.” Mainly, though, she emphasized, “use the golden rule.”[76] Wryly written, her article reveals a deep passion for her viewpoint. “Most important, keep the 11th Commandment: DON’T BE TOO SERIOUS around us. Our problems, our needs, are serious, but…There’s a time and place for dignity, and there’s a time and place for running amok, and we can run amok with the best of them. Ever skateboard on a motorcar? Wanna learn?”[77] Samanda spoke for disability rights when disability visibility was being fought for.

The Electrical Eggs fight inaccessibility at conventions

Marilyn explains to me how Eggs organized. “What else did you want to know? I get off on these tracks,” Marilyn asks me. Something occurs to her, and she boldly treks forward. “We were concerned that people who have disabilities have a darn hard time getting around conventions.” Eggs focused on several avenues for addressing inaccessibility. A con is often inaccessible under the right circumstances. Bathrooms might have narrow entryways. Or the dealers’ room is tight and difficult to move through. Marilyn insists “It’s

[76] Ibid., 80.
[77] Ibid., 81.

the situations around them, the buildings are what handicap somebody…"[78] Eggs took a social model approach in addressing institutional ableism. Although the postmodern model of disability has critiqued aspects of the social model, addressing physical barriers in a convention hall or hotel is a direct way of addressing accessibility in a con context.

Samanda was not alone in making cons more accessible. Her husband Donald supported her efforts, my interviewees mentioned Bill Francis (nicknamed Saint), not to mention the many UK fans who carried the Eggs banner across the Atlantic. But Samanda's partner was Marcia. In the 80s and 90s, Marcia oversaw The Electrical Eggs with Samanda. This involved organizing accessibility resources and registration at cons while also building community. She relates to me how important her work was with Eggs. "I've always been a 'think outside the box' kind of person," she tells me, identifying how integral she was for Eggs.[79]

Marcia's friendship with Samanda looms large in our conversation. As she talks about her, I can hear emotion and tenderness in her voice. "And we just clicked. Like sisters from another. I mean, we even look so much alike that people sometimes confused us if I was on a scooter." Reflecting on her friendship with Samanda, Marcia speaks from the heart. "We all have flaws, but those of us who loved her learned to live with those and work around them. Just like we do with other people we love."[80] Eggs centred on the deeply bonded relationships between women whose lives intersected with disability in individual,

[78] In conversation with Marilyn Teague on February 8, 2023.
[79] In conversation with Marcia Illingworth on March 22, 2023.
[80] In conversation with Marcia Illingworth on March 22, 2023.

yet shared ways. Together, Samanda, Marcia, Marilyn, and the rest accomplished making fan spaces more accessible.

Eggs mediated a wide definition of disability. Eggs provided scooter access for cons. Marilyn relates to me that they borrowed wheelchairs and scooters from wherever they could, in one case, a pharmacy in Georgia offering "two or three wheelchairs for us to use."[81] They printed braille programs for the blind (although they only distributed them a few times, as the braille programs were thick and laborious to carry). They also covered pregnant women, seeing pregnancy as a temporary disability. Marilyn points out, pregnant people "needed accommodations."[82] Marcia helped disseminate accessible programs. She also organized the renting of scooters and wheelchairs, both push and electric. Marcia noted how a non-disabled committee member fell at a con. Marcia organized a wheelchair for her to use.[83] Someone needing accommodations would register with Eggs. Eggs' registration services was necessary, especially for providing ASL interpreters. As Marilyn tells me, "that was unheard of back in 1988, even." They registered service animals, ensuring their qualifications. Additionally, they published an accessibility guidebook for other conventions not managed by the Eggs.[84] All of these efforts existed due to the relationships that Samanda formed with my interviewees and others part of the organization.

[81] In conversation with Marilyn Teague on February 8, 2023.
[82] In conversation with Marilyn Teague on February 8, 2023.
[83] In conversation with Marcia Illingworth on March 22, 2023.
[84] In conversation with Marilyn Teague on February 8, 2023.

The Electrical Eggs today

As explored in this article, the disability rights movement began before Samanda founded Eggs. However, she pushed disability activism forward. Her lived experience counted. Samanda continued living with her disability. In July 2022, she passed away. In many ways, present day disability activism owes much to Samanda and her vision of a more accessible fandom. From those who talk about her, fandom is that much darker without her light. “It was the loss of the world when she passed,” Marcia tells me.[85] Samanda once explained conceiving of Eggs when she wrote to author Gordy Dickson. She thanked him for his books. He replied, “Never pay back in fandom, pay forward. Don’t thank me, thank the people who are going to come into your life you’re going to like…”[86] Eggs fit the bill. Hugo award-winning fan writer Mike Glyer, in his obituary for Samanda, says it best: “In the process of paying forward, a woman whose life doctors wrote off when she was seven has achieved status and prestige in her science fiction community. In doing so, she has made life better for that community.”[87] He concludes by listing her appearances of honour and accolades. I caution us from seeing Samanda’s story as a disabled individual overcoming the tragedy of disability. Samanda struggled with her condition to the very end. What I hope to highlight is that her lived experience mattered greatly, positively changing a community. Samanda’s story is truly a disabled one, for all that entails.

[85] In conversation with Marcia Illingworth on March 22, 2023.
[86] Glyer, “Obituary.”
[87] Ibid.

As for Eggs I have talked to, life goes on, disabilities and all. Marcia celebrated her 25th wedding anniversary in August. Upon returning to fandom after a brief hiatus, she reflects on the challenges her community faces. She still engages with accessibility organizations at cons. “All the battles we had fought and solved back in the 80s and 90s, they [current accessibility organizations] were reinventing the wheel,” she tells me. “And fans told us they had learned the lesson and we weren’t needed anymore. And yet, here you are, solving all the problems that I helped solve 20 years ago.” Institutional fandom memory seems to be porous. Still, present day accessibility policies at cons owe much to Eggs, even if there is a generational disconnect. Presently, at Dragon Con, accessibility organizers maintain a disability services desk, wheelchair accessibility, and ASL interpreters, all hallmarks of the Eggs.[88] The battles fought thirty years ago will no doubt be fought thirty years in the future. Marcia contracted a debilitating respiratory infection that spread to her gastro-intestinal system. She barely survived surgery. “Basically, I tell people all the time I was too damn stubborn,” she laughs, her voice booming on my laptop speakers. “There was a battle going on at the Pearly Gates.” She still regularly attends cons, often as a dealer. She elucidates, “It runs my convention habit.” In fact, she held a de facto family reunion at Worldcon, bringing her kids and grandkids. Throughout this call, she has shared with me her favourite fandom experiences. “I don’t care about autographs,” she tells me. “I care about memories. I love having pictures.” While we wrap up our conversation, she has her heart fully on display. “I pulled my first kid out of the mud

[88] “Disability,” *Dragon Con* (blog), accessed July 9, 2024, https://www.dragoncon.org/resources/at-the-show/disability/.

at the bottom of the bayou when I was 12 years old, and I’ve been trying to save lives ever since.”[89]

Marilyn continues working for ASL interpreting services, carrying on the legacy of Eggs. The companies that she has worked for organize interpreters to go where they are needed, such as hospitals and colleges. She still volunteers for Dragon Con. She worked as the on-site registration director, eventually volunteering as an ASL interpreter. On conventions, she says, “That’s what I like to do. That’s what gets me out of the house. Otherwise, I’d be sitting here.” She even cosplays. Her favourite costume is Captain Peggy Carter who she dresses as alongside other Avengers cosplayers. We often talked about *Star Trek* during our conversation, and how its promises have come to fruition. She remarks, “It just gave people hope…for the future.” She seems to be hopeful for what fandom faces today. Fandom seems to be moving in the right direction, thanks to stories like *Star Trek*. “But we get so much from Star Trek…Oh gee, that’s very heavy, isn’t it?” she comments. One of her favourite memories concerns a “mini-convention” her husband organized. In his hometown of Panama City, Florida, he gathered around 25 people for a backyard barbeque. She describes conventions, even this tiny one, as homecoming. “Fandom is all-encompassing,” she tells me. “It’s like you can go to conventions and you can be a person with a disability and you can…be around other people, not so much disabled, but just people in general and you can become friends with.” Our conversation winds down, and I report that I have pages of notes. “And you can tell people that you’re

[89] In conversation with Marcia Illingworth on March 22, 2023.

having a little mini convention right here," she insists.[90] The Eggs' legacy, although distanced in memory from the newer generation, continues through the efforts of Marilyn and Marcia.

Conclusion

Disability is central to science fiction fandom. Starting in the 1920s, science fiction authors proposed ways technology would impact the humanity's relationship with disability. Around these works, fan communities formed, consisting of many disabled fans. Together, they shared in disabled experiences. It is time for science fiction scholars to utilize a disability lens to study their field. Similarly, disability historians ought to look through the lives of science fiction fans for testamentary evidence of disability. From the start, science fiction fans had a specific understanding of the human body that reflected and informed contemporary understandings of disability. The *Star Trek* series only lightly considers disability, admittedly. In its shiny future, disabilities can be easily fixed or excluded. But it still spoke to the fans I talked to, and so did many other science fiction texts like it.

The Electrical Eggs was a remarkable organization at the nexus of science fiction and disability. Aside from ideas of genre, people and their intentions built this community. Samanda convinced others like Marilyn and Marcia to organize, making fandom more accessible. We still fight ableism today. However, we do not face uncharted territory like the Enterprise treks through. We know it thanks to people like Samanda.

[90] In conversation with Marilyn Teague on February 8, 2023.

The story of disability in science fiction is not what a reader may find in the pages of writers like Isaac Asimov or Ray Bradbury. Instead, it is written by the disabled fans who read, create, and imagine communities on their own. I quote Samanda in her essay “They Only Handicap the Best Horses.” She says how a frustrating experience is people commenting on one’s disability, filling their ignorance with their own misplaced opinions. “It’s the sort of thing that could make you go crazy,” she wrote. “Luckily, most Handicapped people grow armor consisting of:…” She cites things like “a strong personality,” a “sense of humor,” and “imaginations that can only take us out of this galaxy, away from this reality…into bodies that reflect who we can be…” Lastly, she mentions “the smug realization that **we’ve** come to grips with, and conquered…ageing.”[91] Despite decades of science fiction labelling disabled bodies as defective, disabled fans and their allies rose above such stereotypes and crafted their own narratives and relationships, using the genre that they loved so much.

[91] Jeude, 79-80.

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