



**Community
Engagement &
Education**

DISCUSSION GUIDE



I DIDN'T SEE YOU THERE

a film by Reid Davenport and Keith Wilson

www.pbs.org/pov



I DIDN'T SEE YOU THERE

Spurred by the spectacle of a circus tent outside his Oakland apartment, a disabled filmmaker launches a meditative journey exploring the history of freakdom, vision, and (in)visibility. Shot from director Reid Davenport's physical perspective—with a camera mounted to his wheelchair or handheld—*I Didn't See You There* serves as a clear rebuke to the norm of disabled people being seen and not heard.

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This guide is an invitation to dialogue. It is based on a belief in the power of human connection and designed for people who want to use *I Didn't See You There* to engage family, friends, classmates, colleagues, and communities. In contrast to initiatives that foster debates in which participants try to convince others that they are right, this document envisions conversations undertaken in a spirit of openness in which people try to understand one another and expand their thinking by sharing experiences and viewpoints and actively listening to one another in a care-forward environment.

The discussion prompts are intentionally crafted to help a wide range of audiences think more deeply about the issues in the film. Rather than attempting to address them all, choose one or two that best meet your needs and interests. And be sure to leave time to consider taking action. Planning next steps can help people leave the room feeling energized and optimistic, even in instances when conversations have been difficult.

For more detailed event planning and facilitation tips, visit <https://communitynetwork.amdoc.org/>.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS AND COMMON CONCEPTS

Ableism

A form of discrimination targeting disabled people or those whose bodies and minds do not conform to rigid ideas of how we must move, think, behave, and create.

BodyMinds

A word used from a disability justice context to describe the deep connection between our bodies and minds. Attempts to separate them often are from a medical and pathologizing approach.

Disability Justice

A movement led by disabled people of color who are queer and trans creatives and media makers advocating for collective access and liberation for all disabled people in the United States.

Disability Rights

A movement guided by disabled people advocating for laws and policies to expand protections and anti-discrimination for disabled people in the United States.

Eugenics

A movement and approach of the early 20th century in the United States and globally that promoted the idea that only the best and most successful people's bodies and minds should survive and flourish and used racist, xenophobic, and ableist approaches to describe and decide who was worthy of medical care, quality education, human rights, and freedom.

Supremacy

Belief and actions that misuse power to uphold one group's superiority over another group.

Voyeurism

Receiving pleasure from watching others experience difficulty. Further, invading their privacy by watching them.

KEY PARTICIPANTS + ISSUES

Reid - the director of the film who has the camera documenting what we experience in the film

Community members - those who are captured throughout Reid's filming

Viewers - those of us who are viewing the film

KEY ISSUES

I Didn't See You There is an excellent tool for outreach and will be of special interest to people who want to explore the following topics:

- Disability
- Disability rights
- Communication and storytelling
- Media making and media justice
- Self-determination
- Consent
- Voyeurism
- Ableism
- Power

Disability in the United States

Disabled people¹ are everywhere. They are in our communities, schools, homes, and even writing this guide! Disabled people have created and contributed to some of the most important laws, experiences, media, and movements across the globe, and especially in the United States. Despite this, the United States has a very specific and harmful history and present of ignoring, hurting, institutionalizing, and isolating the disability community. Often this type of exclusion and isolation is allowed to continue because of how non-disabled people think disabled bodies and minds must move, think, behave, and create. Experiencing discrimination when someone's body and mind does not follow such expectations set by non-disabled people is called ableism. Ableism is a form of misusing power to isolate and harm others based on their disability.

Part of the horrific and shocking history of the treatment of disabled people in the United States is rooted in the idea that only the best and most successful people's bodies and minds should survive and flourish. This idea is called eugenics. In the early 1900s, eugenics became a movement in the United States and its proponents used racist, xenophobic, and ableist approaches to decide who was worthy of medical care, quality education, human rights, and freedom.

Eugenicists did not always consider that they, too, could become disabled or experience disability, because they thought themselves to be superior to others, especially disabled people, immigrants, and people with darker skin. This belief of superiority is called supremacy. In the United States today, there are still laws that allow disabled people to lose their human rights, be forcibly sterilized, and become institutionalized.

One of these laws, the Virginia Sterilization Act of 1924, although slightly updated, is still in effect. In fact, only two states in the United States have banned forced sterilization of disabled people, leaving 48 states that do not protect their rights.

¹ The author of this guide is disabled, as is the director of the film. In this guide, the author will use identity first (disabled person) and person-first (people with disabilities) language. There is no uniform agreement among the disability community on which is best; we each have our own opinion. It is suggested if you are non-disabled to use person-first language unless told otherwise by the disabled people and communities with whom you are collaborating.

Language and Representation

Language is powerful and can be used to harm and hurt. Using language that identifies disabled people as missing or losing something because of their disability supports eugenics, as does describing disabled people as unattractive. Images, media, and other representations of disability and people with disabilities is another way people learn about, and come to misunderstand, disability. Often people with disabilities are represented in the media as dependent on their mobility devices and the help of others. This view of disability from non-disabled people as always physical is sometimes called visible disability. The reality is that everyone, no matter their ability status, needs help. The framing of disabled people as always reliant on something or somebody else puts them in a box and undermines a universal need we all share: the need to be supported.

In the United States, physical appearance has been weaponized and politicized in ways that harm disabled people. Media representations of disabled people as undesirable, unattractive, or somehow lacking contribute to the isolation, erasure, and institutional oppression disabled people continue to face. In fact, in the late 1880s, “ugly law” statutes were enacted across the United States. These statutes were first introduced and made law in San Francisco and focused on the behaviors and appearances of people who were deemed “beggars” and, further, sought to limit “unattractive” people from being seen in public. In short, these laws targeted poor and homeless people, as well as people with visible disabilities, by trying to outlaw their public presence.

As we seek to protect the rights of people with disabilities, we need to work toward reframing the way disabled people are talked about and represented in our society, thus changing the way we perceive and legislate issues impacting their lives.

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Disability at Human Zoos, Circuses, and Freak Shows

Disabled people have been kept out of the public through incarceration, institutionalization, and inaccessibility, positioning disability as something shameful to fear. “Human zoos” were enslavement camps that held people hostage and dehumanized them because their captors believed they were subhuman and different. They often included darker skinned people, people with disabilities, and people with bodies that were considered uncommon or shocking. This could be anything from their hair texture and location, to body shape and size, body adornment, such as tattoos, and congenital deformities and differences. Some of the bodies of those who were enslaved in human zoos were exhibited in museums. Some museums still have bones and body parts in their collections, an issue that remains devastating and controversial today.

When attending a traveling circus that toured small towns, local townspeople were expected to be curious, and that curiosity was welcomed. One aspect of traveling circuses was sideshows, also called “freak shows. A variation on zoos, these featured people with a range of disabilities displaying their bodies for paying customers. For many disabled people, this was the only form of employment available at the height of the eugenics movement and amidst “ugly laws.” Sometimes, these freak shows were marketed to visitors as “oddities”; attendees would watch, gawk, laugh, and be entertained.

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Circuses have been a part of social and cultural experiences across the globe for generations, yet not everyone involved with a circus consented to join. Some people were sold into a circus by family or those who owned them during enslavement, making their time in the circus another form of enslavement. Others may have sought employment at the circus to live interdependent lives in the circus community.

P. T. Barnum, the founder of Barnum & Bailey Circus, who is mentioned in *I Didn't See You There*, was a politician in Connecticut for two terms. He considered himself a showman, and in 1835, he created a circus and “freak show.” His work involved exploitation, including purchasing people who were enslaved and had physical disabilities. Barnum’s views of supremacy and power were displayed across the United States as he promoted and marketed his circus. He exploited and dehumanized people who were different based on their disabilities, skin color, ethnic background, body shape, and size. While the eugenics movement has been delegitimized as violent, strands of supremacist thought inherent to eugenics are still apparent in the United States today. These harmful ideologies can be found in white supremacist, transphobic, and xenophobic people and policies.

Many people advocate for abolition of the forms of institutionalization of which Barnum participated. These activists argue that all incarceration—of both people and animals—is oppressive and violent.

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Disability Rights Movement in the United States

To push back on the different types of ableism that many have experienced, and to demand human rights and access to public spaces, the U.S. disability rights movement emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. This is a movement led by and for disabled people that created many changes in U.S. laws and policies. The disability rights movement also offered one of the first platforms and opportunities to discuss ableism and understand its impact and how we are all responsible for unlearning ableist thoughts and practices. One important piece of legislation established during this movement was the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), passed in 1990. This law offers legal protections to disabled people, ensuring their inclusion in daily life. This means having access to buildings, parks, and medical care. It also covers providing equitable education to disabled children and youth by administering an Individual Education Plan (IEP) or 504 Plan. These may seem like common experiences today, but that's because of the work of activists in the disability rights movement. Before passage of the ADA, these items often were not available to disabled people in the United States.

Many of the individuals in the disability rights movement experienced intersectional oppression due to their age, gender, race, class, sexuality, and more. Despite this, they engaged in activism that fueled critical legislation supporting the disability community. In 1973, the Rehabilitation Act was signed into law. It states that no program receiving federal funding may discriminate against anyone with a disability. This includes housing, education, employment, transportation, and medical care. Activists in the movement include people born disabled, those who acquired their disabilities, and veterans disabled during their military service.

When the Rehabilitation Act was passed, the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) became the lead agency to create regulations for section 504, which protects against discrimination; however, these regulations were slow to be developed. Disability activists organized 504 sit-ins in various cities across the United States to pressure HEW to create regulations and hold it accountable. During these sit-ins, people with disabilities occupied federal buildings. One sit-in in San Francisco lasted 26 days. As disabled organizers and protestors made their demands, traveled, and lobbied in Washington, D.C., the leadership at HEW were forced to pay attention and act. Four years later, the regulations were published. The 504 sit-ins showed the world that disabled people are powerful.

The disability rights movement is not isolated from other social and political movements in U.S. history; in fact, this movement has intersected with and bolstered other movements many times. One such example is the activism surrounding HIV. It is important to consider

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how people living with HIV² were, and still are, often identified as undesirable and outcasts and how similar this is to the “ugly laws” of the United States. In 1981, the first published information about a new illness was released in the United States. This illness would come to be understood as HIV (human immunodeficiency virus), the virus that leads to AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome). Despite the reality that anyone in the world could be at risk for HIV, messaging in the United States specifically targeted LGBTQ folks, drug-users, and sex workers. As more community members died of AIDS and its complications, more organizing and protests emerged. Organizations such as National Minority AIDS Council (NMAC) and AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) began to demand access to lifesaving research, medication, and care. A framework of harm reduction was established by those most impacted. That framework outlines and encourages strategies for reducing negative experiences connected to drug use. Access to medical care, housing, and body autonomy—the human right to make decisions about what happens to your body—are all areas of focus for many of these movements.

Protests and organizing continued among people with disabilities, much of it focused on expanding the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and identifying disabled people and communities as needing protection from discrimination. In March 1990, many disabled people, alongside their families and community members, protested in Washington, D.C. to fight to have the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) signed into law. When they reached the Capitol building, many of the protestors who used mobility devices left their devices at the foot of the steps and crawled up the steps of the Capitol building to demonstrate how inaccessible public spaces were for some people with physical disabilities. This protest became known as the Capitol Crawl and offered pivotal imagery that was captured and presented in the media, demonstrating the power of protest and the need for access among people with disabilities. The ADA was signed into law in the summer of 1990, and in 2008, almost 20 years later, an amendment to the ADA expanded inclusions and protections. This expansion offered protection to people with auto-immune needs and people living with HIV.

Many disabled people continue to advocate for quality care, equitable access, and collective liberation.

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Disability Justice Movement in the United States

Disability has always existed, and various cultures and communities across the world have different perspectives on and ideas about their disabled community members. In the United States, many disabled people organize and advocate for more expansive civil and human rights. Much of this push comes from disability justice movement organizers. The disability justice movement followed the development of the disability rights movement and the ADA becoming law. It is a movement that is led by disabled people, especially those who are experiencing more than one type of oppression because of their gender, race, ethnicity, immigration status, specific disability, sexual orientation, and more. The framework for disability justice evolved from disabled people involved in liberation movements who were and are creatives and media makers of color, disabled people being in community together,

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and disabled folks who were being left out of larger movement space. The goal of the disability justice movement is to end all types of oppression faced by disabled people. We/they move toward freedom together.

The disability performance and art group [Sins Invalid](#), in California, introduced the disability justice framework to the public. The disability justice framework changed the way people discuss and relate to disability topics and disabled people. The disability justice movement has deep roots and ties to liberation and freedom movements in the United States, such as the Black Power, Red Power, and anti-war movements. Several liberation-movement organizations, such as the Black Panther Party, Young Lords, Brown Berets, Asian American Political Alliance, and American Indian Movement, influenced disability justice movements. For many disability justice movement organizers, art, poetry, storytelling, music, dance, and other forms of media making were and are central to the goal of collective liberation. The principles and tenets of liberatory movements include: self-determination, leadership by those most impacted, community power of public spaces and programs, and support for other liberation movements. For example, the Black Panther Party Ten-Point Program began, “We want freedom. We want power to determine the destiny of our Black Community,” while the Brown Berets Ten-Point Program sought “unity of all of our people, regardless of age, income, or political philosophy.” The Young Lords Party’s 13 Point Platform stated, “We want self-determination for Puerto Ricans... all Latinos... all third world people.”

The disability justice movement is in alignment with similar liberation and freedom movements, as it is grounded in self-determination and political and cultural power. Many organizers work to ensure their communities have access to quality and culturally affirming food and health care. This is one of the reasons the Black Panther Party brought food to protestors occupying the government building during the 504 sit-ins. Pushing for more equitable healthcare, the Young Lords occupied a hospital in the South Bronx. The Young Lords also drew up the first Patient’s Bill of Rights. Since then, many hospitals across the United States have adopted and implemented similar documents for their patients.

Importantly, the framework of disability justice is written by and for disabled people, many of whom are also multigender or multiracial or have various experiences that inform their vision for collective liberation. The 10 principles of disability justice are as follows:

1. intersectionality
2. leadership by those most impacted
3. anti-capitalist politics
4. commitment to cross-movement organizing (disability is present in and crosses all movements)
5. recognizing wholeness

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6. sustainability
7. commitment to cross-disability solidarity
8. interdependence
9. collective access
10. collective liberation

Similar goals exist in other movements focused on self-determination and freedom, which is why one of the principles of disability justice is commitment to cross-movement organizing. Disability justice organizers know disabled people are everywhere—in every movement from climate change and chaos to the movements for black lives, reproductive justice, net neutrality, and land back. Disabled people are here and always have been and will be in the future!

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ONE: STARTING THE CONVERSATION ON DISABILITY

After the film concludes, offer participants a moment to do a bodymind scan. This is an invitation for participants to notice how their bodies and minds are connected and to notice anything showing up in their bodyminds that may need attention, care, or to be shared. You may guide them with this script:

Thank you for joining in viewing this film. Let's take a collective moment to pause and check in with our bodies and minds and note what may be coming up for us. You may want to close your eyes, stretch your body, lie on the floor, adjust your seating, or do whatever you need to check in with yourself. This is an invitation to notice what emerged for you in your body and mind and what may need some attention. We will open up the space in a moment for you to share whatever you choose.

When a minute or two has passed, invite volunteers to share what may have emerged for them that they wish to bring into the space. If the group is large, consider having only a few volunteers share and offering for others to partner-share with those nearby before bringing the group back together.

Next, open a facilitated conversation that includes the following questions:

- What was your understanding of disability before joining our viewing today? What has changed or expanded?
- What is ableism and what is its impact? What are examples of ableism in the film?
- When do we witness disabled joy in the film? How do we know?
- When do we witness disabled rage in the film? How do we know?

TWO: POWER AND CONSENT

Based on the responses to the questions about ableism, you may want to offer a definition of ableism (see Glossary) and frame it as a form of power that is misused to oppress, harm, and isolate disabled people. Invite participants to consider their own personal power. Remind participants that power is all around us all the time, shifting and changing. Ask them to consider the following:

- What does it feel like to have power and use it in our lives?
- What power does the filmmaker hold in creating this film?

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

In the film, we hear a BART announcement: “Please keep seats adjacent to the train doors available for seniors, people with disabilities, those who are pregnant, and others who need special access to train doors. Please help us keep BART trains accessible.”

- How is creating accessible spaces for all a form of power?
- Who is responsible for using their power in such a way?
- Is this possible for us as individuals to do?
- How is this type of power connected to consent, or agreement that people deserve to have their needs met?

When we watch a film, we are consenting to witness a story. In this film, the director invites us to witness his experience moving in his communities in Oakland, California, and Bethel, Connecticut.

- What stories exist in the film that Reid is inviting us to understand?
- What forms of consent are represented in the film?
- How may the people Reid comes into contact with in his neighborhood, at the airport, or on BART, consent to be in his film?
- What are the ethics of documenting our lives and the responses of those around us, who witness us but do not consent to being filmed?
- How is filming being used in our communities today?
- Have you ever been filmed without your consent? What did it feel like? Why do you think it happened?
- What power existed for Reid Donovan as the one filming?
- What power existed for those who did not consent to being filmed yet watched him move in the world?

THREE: VOYEURISM

Several quotes from Reid reflect how he feels moving in the world and having people see him but not feeling seen. He says, “I wanted to make a film about how I saw the world. I thought if I stayed firmly behind the camera, I could show you how I see, without having to be seen... I can feel it when I’m stared at and when I’m not seen. Do you see me?”

- Do you consider yourself a voyeur while watching this film?
- Do you think Reid considers us voyeurs?
- Are the people with whom Reid comes into contact voyeurs? What is the impact of voyeurism?

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

How may DeafBlind, low vision, or Blind community members witness or “see” Reid and this film?

- How do we feel, see, hear, taste, and smell with our entire bodies?
- Can you think of an experience you would like to share?
- Think about the sounds in this film. How would you describe them?
- What vibrations do you imagine the sounds make?

Reid shares how the red circus tent followed him as he began filming. Remembering that we can feel, see, hear, taste, and smell with our entire bodies, consider the following questions:

- Was this a consensual or non-consensual relationship for Reid?
- How do you know?

FOUR: FREAK SHOW/CIRCUS

At several points, Reid discusses circuses and “freak shows.” *This may be a difficult conversation to facilitate as many people may share experiences of harm, violence, and discrimination when they were dehumanized.* It’s important to ease into the conversation with a question such as, “When Reid began to discuss the circus and ‘freak shows,’ what came up for you?” You may read the quotes below or play them again for viewers using the time stamps. Then ask participants the questions that follow.

Quote 1 00:07:48:21–00:08:05:18

“Soon after I started filming, this circus tent went up across the street from my apartment. It seemed out of place in the middle of Oakland.”

Quote 2 00:12:41:19–00:14:17:13

“Every time I went out to film, the circus tent was in the shot. The tent made me think about the legacy of the freak show, about being looked at, but not seen. Freak shows used to display certain people—brown, queer, disabled—as ‘human oddities.’ Performers included Calvin Phillips, ‘the famous American dwarf child’; Chang and Eng, ‘Siamese double boys’; and Jenny Lee and Elvira Snow, who were billed as ‘pinheads.’ I couldn’t shoot a frame without thinking about this goddamned tent.”

Quote 3 01:07:57:13–01:08:28:12

“My hometown’s most famous native is P. T. Barnum, also known as the Circus King, who popularized the freak show in the 19th century. This monument to P. T. Barnum went up after I left Bethel. It was hard to shoot. For the world’s most renowned circus showman, it seemed pretty bleak. But he still got his pedestal.”

CLOSING QUESTION/ACTIVITY

- What is a circus and what role does it play in our societies?
- Why are “freak shows” important to understand as a part of disability history?
- How are “freak shows” connected to oppression?
- How do voyeurism, consent, power, and “freak shows” connect?

To end the discussion offer an open ended question such as:

- How does the film challenge us to consider how we have made “freak shows” an everyday experience for disabled people?

Consider guiding a closing activity that offers participants the opportunity to reflect on their experience participating in this discussion. For example, invite participants to complete the sentence stem below before closing the space. Allow time for everyone to consider their response before beginning to share the responses:

- Sentence stem: I have learned that disability is...

What could you do to begin to understand and challenge ableism?

- Tell your own story! Document and archive your life: consider creating podcasts, short videos, microblogs, and more.
- Attend events created by and featuring people with disabilities.
- Continue watching films by and for disabled people, such as those featured at the Superfest Disability Film Festival and *Crip Camp*.
- Think about the power in language. Use the word “disabled” instead of other terms like “differently abled” or “handicapped.”
- Follow, listen to, and engage with disabled content creators online and on social media.
- Think more critically about what and who we witness and the impact.
- Ensure spaces and places you are a part of are accessible for all people and include access information and a contact person to reach out to for more information.
- Advocate for the *Patient No More* exhibition to be brought to your school, library, or community space.
- Practice inviting conversations about consent in your everyday activities.
- Learn sign language.

Disability Organizations

Autistic Women and Nonbinary Network <https://awnnetwork.org/> offers community support and resources for autistic people across and beyond a gender spectrum.

Fireweed Collective <https://fireweedcollective.org/> is an organization that offers mental health support, mutual aid, and workshops on a variety of topics with a focus on queer, trans, Black, Indigenous, People of Color.

Helping Educate to Advance the Rights of the Deaf (HEARD) <https://behearddc.org/> is a cross-disability abolitionist organization to end ableism, oppression, and violence.

National Council on Independent Living <https://ncil.org/> is the longest running national cross-disability organization advocating for the rights of disabled communities and independent living.

Sins Invalid <https://www.sinsinvalid.org/> brought the disability justice framework to the public and offers a range of readings and performances to view and purchase.

CREDITS & ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**Bianca I Laureano, PhD, h.c.. MA², CSE, CSES**

Bianca I Laureano is an award-winning educator, curriculum writer, and sexologist with over 20 years of experience. She is the foundress of ANTE UP! Professional Development, a virtual freedom school.



Bianca is a fat light skinned disabled queer AfraLatina who is smiling and looking to the right. Her hands are clasped and we see her orange fingernails and gold rings. She is wearing light blue heart-shaped glasses and red lipstick and has large round gold earrings. Her hair is up and her blondish brown curls cascade around her head. A black t-shirt that scoops across her shoulders reveals the many tattoos on her arms.

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Thanks to those who reviewed and contributed to this resource:

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