

Fields of the Future

A Podcast by Bard Graduate Center

Episode 7: Jaipreet Virdi— Disability Objects in the Archives

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Transcript

Introduction: This is Fields of the Future. An interview series by Bard Graduate Center that highlights the work of scholars, artists, and writers who are changing the way we think about the material world. In this episode Elizabeth Guffey speaks to historian Jaipreet Virdi about disability studies, her path breaking approach to research, and the inclusive and collaborative opportunities social media allows scholars.

Elizabeth Guffey: Hi, I'm Elizabeth Guffey professor of Art History and Coordinator of the MA program in Modern Contemporary Art Criticism and Theory at Purchase College, and I'm also a Fall 2020, Fields of the Future Fellow at Bard Graduate Center. And I'm thrilled to have Jai Virdi here with us today, and she is an assistant professor of History at the University of Delaware. So, Jai, welcome.

Jaipreet Virdi: Hello. Hi, Elizabeth. I'm very happy to be here today.

Elizabeth Guffey: Jai, can you tell us something about your relationship to objects?

Jaipreet Virdi: Sure, I can tell you that I'm currently wearing digital hearing aids and a pair of glasses, so I have a very intimate and personal relationship with objects, in that they are on my face. But I am also a collector of historical artifacts relating to disability and medicine, as well as a scholar who's trained in material culture. So objects are very much the cornerstone of how I think about history, how I approach disability, and how I imagine the kinds of scholarship that I want to produce.

Elizabeth Guffey: It occurs to me that it's probably worth for a moment for the two of us to just discuss disability studies as a field, which I believe has its own body of theory and scholarly conversation. Disability studies is not only the writing about disabilities, but also about thinking critically about disability and ways that we have developed and could also, potentially, shift how we understand normative perspectives. This is what I usually say. Jai, maybe you want to expand on that a little bit more.

Jaipreet Virdi: Absolutely. I should also preface by saying that I work on disability history, which means most of my theorizing, most of my actual hands-on work, comes from whatever is in the archives. One thing I use disability for is as a lens for analysis or as a framework for navigating through the sources I find in the archive. But the same way we think about unraveling issues of race or gender, we try to find disability in the archive, and think about how we can possibly rewrite histories that we're familiar with or even conventional histories by bringing disability

into the conversation. What kinds of narratives can we devise if we think about, for example, the history of immigration through disability? Or the history of education or the history of access? Disability is kind of a broader term in the way I teach it. It is really about thinking of relationships and assets within social and cultural context.

Elizabeth Guffey: Well, one of the reasons why I wanted to bring in to this discussion is also because you're so engaged with material culture, but also really, specifically, objects. And to just point to, for a quick moment, your book that just came out, *Hearing Happiness*, but, also, *Making Disability Modern*, which is a book I co-edited, which also has come out right now, and you have an essay in that. You've really been exploring disability in that way, which I think is kind of novel, and it's worth highlighting and probing this a little bit. Of course, *Hearing Happiness*, is an exploration of deafness cures through history, but one of the things that I just find so fascinating is the way that you really work with, not just the archive, but historical objects too. And I started to get this sense of a whole sub-class of objects or things that you're dealing with that bring together this intersection of material culture and critical disability studies. And sometimes I'm starting now, to think of them as disability objects. Maybe you could describe for the audience a little bit about that engagement with objects, and especially, how they fit into your practice as a scholar or in writing *Hearing Happiness*.

Jaipreet Virdi: Textual archives, I've found, don't always capture the entire lived experiences of disability, because so much of disability is three dimensional. It is about using objects to improve your surroundings. It is about adding objects to your body to better improve your navigation of the world, or to improve your sense or your physical disability, that doesn't always come across in the archive. And one of the things I struggled with, when I was doing research for *Hearing Happiness*, is I was looking at advertisements of hearing aids, and advertisements are really about promoting aspirational social realities. They're not always an accurate reflection of the cultural context in which the product is being sold through. So what frustrated me is that looking at all of these twentieth-century hearing aids in these advertisements, you don't really see how the people or the hard of hearing were using these devices, you just see ideal images. And what was actually revealing for me is that so much of the advertising was really about concealing, though they did show the device as it's meant to be in its ideal form so the wires are hidden, it fits perfectly on the body, a woman can use accessories to further camouflage the devices. But as a person who wears hearing aids, I know it's not always a perfect seamless transition between the body and the device. So I have instances in which, for example, my hearing aid microphone clashes against the eyeglasses that I wear and it creates this feedback noise. It's that kind of struggle that I have to face with daily. And I know, for example, I'm also constantly taking apart my hearing aid to repair it or to better make it fit properly in my ear. So having that kind of tacit knowledge, for me personally, kind of influenced the way I was thinking about hearing aids in the archive. How much can the textual records actually tell me about the ways in which deaf and hard of hearing people who were really wearing the hearing aid? There would have been a lot. So I started to turn to material culture as a way to supplement the kind of knowledge that I wanted to extract from the archive, but actually couldn't find. And it was quite revealing, because these hearing aids, as

material objects, they tell me so much more about the user. I can see dents in the devices, from when I imagined they were dropping it or when it was clashing against other objects in their surroundings. I can see modification with wires to address how you wear it comfortably on your body. I can see personal tastes with regard to design and color and just other kinds of individual preferences. So objects become so important in the way I think about a person's lived experiences of disability, and it allows me to write more individual stories about disability, rather than exploring a one size fits all kind of model, for thinking about disability objects.

Elizabeth Guffey: Most scholars have books around their desks, but I know you have a couple of shelves sitting above your desk, with various objects on them as well. Could you tell us something about the things that are sitting on those shelves?

Jaipreet Virdi: On the shelf in front of me, I have mostly mid-twentieth-century hearing aids, variations of vacuum tube hearing aids of all sizes as well as some twentieth-century hearing aids, and two nineteenth-century ear trumpets. And they're just sitting there, they're not really on display, but what they've become for me is... because they're right in my line of sight, they've become a visual reminder about how I'm constantly thinking about material objects, and they are very useful props for teaching or for when I'm giving talks. It all started when I was doing research for *Hearing Happiness* and actually struggling to imagine how some of these people that I write about were using nineteenth-century ear trumpets, because the advertisements of these devices always show a person holding their device very close to their body. But in the written record, especially diaries or letters by deaf people who used these ear trumpets, they described actually moving their body to use these devices. And as a deaf person, I became really curious about, how does your body movement and how does the placement of an ear trumpet help or worsen your ability to hear? So what started off as a random thrift store find, just going to thrift stores, going to Goodwill, going to antique stores. I would often ask the salesperson whether or not they had anything that would resemble an ear trumpet. And I eventually found one, and that was the beginning of this collection. And I've learned so much by looking at this material culture, and the more I collected, the more of an expert I became on these technologies, because there is something about having the device in front of you. You actually see and feel how these devices could have been worn by a person. And one thing that always shocks me is the weight of the battery, some of the batteries are about five to fifteen pounds. For this idea of your practical experience of wearing hearing aids, it meant strapping on heavy batteries, changes the way we think about people interacting with their devices.

Elizabeth Guffey: I will say in my own research on nineteenth-century disability objects, I've had trouble finding stuff in historical collections, and the historical collections that are out there, often are not very well cataloged or the stuff maybe doesn't make its way into the official catalog, or it's not the first thing that ends up being cataloged. Are there these sorts of objects in other collections out there and we're just not aware of them? Or are they existing in thrift stores? Or do you think that they're still seen mainly as cast offs? How would you describe the status of these sorts of objects?

Jaipreet Virdi: So I've seen them across many collections, for example, at the Smithsonian Museum of American History there's a wonderful collection of hearing aids there, especially twentieth-century hearing aids. I actually got to go to the warehouse and they pulled out drawers of these devices for me. But many of them are still in pristine condition, and they tell me about how well kept they were, perhaps the user was a well-off donor who donated a whole bunch of collections. And there's a lot of nineteenth-century artifacts there. Similarly, the Becker Medical Library at Washington University in St. Louis also has a wonderful collection of nineteenth-century hearing artifacts, especially devices that were meant to be camouflaged, so these so called, walking sticks, an acoustic fan, and those fake beards where you can hide your ear trumpets—they have that, and it is marvelous. The other collection I've looked at is, well, it's currently packed up, and that's at Penn State's Audiology Department, which used to be the Hearing Aid Museum. I got a chance to go look at the archives there as well as the material collection, because the material collection, if my memory serves me correctly, takes up two hallways of this place, of all kinds of technologies relating to deafness, hearing loss, audiology, including machines, all kinds of devices, some still with manuals, et cetera. It was a gold mine of wonderful deaf history. And—as you read in the book—I also talk about going to the electrical museum at the Bakken Museum in Minneapolis. But what I really wanted to find was devices that weren't as well known, for example, like unconventional hearing aids. When I come across some of these sales for hearing aids, people keep them as they lived. So I have a box with a mailing address, I have all the repair orders this person had made throughout their lifetime of using this one hearing aid. All the spare parts, some notations from their doctor. This is wonderful. It's a really rich history right there. I've bought hearing aids off eBay and then been pleasantly surprised when, in the bottom of the box, there is a handmade—I don't know how to call it—“case” perhaps, for carrying around the hearing aid. This is stuff that I don't find in museum collections.

Elizabeth Guffey: One of the things that's striking in your work is that you are doing this really rich and layered kind of storytelling through these things and objects, and I'm wondering, maybe, we can just take a step back, methodologically, and think about how storytelling and objects you would say fit into academic studies.

Jaipreet Virdi: That's a really great question, and one that I come across quite often, when I talk about my work. How does a historian write in a narrative guise that can appeal to general readers? I can tell you, right off the bat, that the traditional academic pipeline, so to speak, is, you write your dissertation as your PhD, and then you rework your dissertation for a book. I decided not to do that. While I was doing research for my PhD dissertation, which is on nineteenth-century ear surgery in British history, I was coming across all these wonderful resources about hearing aids or airplane diving or other kinds of seemingly silly cures for deafness. And I was just shelving them away for possibly a later project. By the time I defended my dissertation and then graduated, I was burnt out from the topic, and I didn't think I had it in me to write a book about great white men in British history. I felt like there's nothing new I can say, and I was frustrated because a lot of the archives that I wanted to access for my dissertation kept denying me permission to access them. And that's a whole other story about

private collections. But I had kept all these items, these fascinating tidbits about deafness cures that didn't fit into my dissertation. So when I defended and graduated, I went back to that collection, and just gave a little pitch to interested publishers about, "Hey, do you think there's a market here for general readers, who might be interested in a new kind of disability history, one that takes the reader to the archive, one that includes a partial narrative?" There was some back and forth with my press, because they wanted me to include more stories about myself in the book, and I was pushing back on that because I didn't want this to be an autobiography. That's not what this book is about. What I wanted to do with, including my story, is demonstrate how disability history is constantly ongoing. The experiences I go through as a deaf person reflects a person's experiences 10, 15, 50, a 100 years ago, because there is something that seems to be constant about disability experience that allows us to empathize across the sources, across time, and connects to the historical actors that we write about. So in thinking about how I wanted to write this book, I wanted it to be a story, a story about deaf people, a story about why they decided to try these seemingly ridiculous, perhaps, dangerous cures in the hopes of curing their hearing loss, why not just accept their deafness? So that's... The storytelling aspect was really crucial, and I can tell you it was not easy. I read so many books, like "how to" books on creative writing. I joined Zoom sessions about improving your writing techniques. I really taught myself how to shift away from that objective, academic, jargon laden writing style, and really expand my creative technique. It was a long process, but it was something that I really worked on, and I'm still working on that.

Elizabeth Guffey: I do find myself also running into the thing that you were mentioning that your press was pushing you for, which was more a kind of personal account, and I think for both of us as historians...we're not trained to write that way...and it feels almost as if you're violating the rules of what it is to be an academic, to describe one's own, very personal bodily reactions in these ways. You've just got your first reviews coming in, and in the review that just came out in the *Social History of Medicine*, the book has been called, "methodologically path-breaking." And maybe, this is part of that path-breaking approach that you're taking up? Maybe, you want to tell me how does it feel to be a path-breaker or could you maybe give us a sense of where you feel like that path-breaking, maybe, is coming from, parting from the way that medical history has been practiced so far?

Jaipreet Virdi: I was thrilled this morning when I read that review, but I also felt like this enormous pressure, because I felt like, it's something that I did not set out to do with my book. I wasn't thinking about writing a book that was going to be a new way of thinking about historical methods. It was not even a book that I was even thinking about to be my, so called, tenure book, because I was unemployed at that time, and had given myself a three-year cut off to find a job, and then I was going to quit and go do something else. I was not going to spend my whole life waiting around for academia to recognize me, but I wanted to write this book, because it was a story that I felt deserved to be told, and at the very least, I can say I'm an author, even if I never stayed in academia. As I tell a lot of people, "*Hearing Happiness* was a book I wrote for fun." It was not a book I was thinking, conceptually, about how we can inform historical methods. But because, as you said, we're trained as historians, it is something that

our understanding of theory and methods do influence the way we think about our writing and how we incorporate our sources. And one issue, as you brought this up, about scholarly objectivity, how do my experiences as a deaf person, as somebody who lived through all of kinds of deafness cures and faced stigma and discrimination, and also, someone who has been forced by others into this, so called, overcoming narrative because I seemed to be successful enough as a deaf person, who ended up being a professor and a writer. But when I think about my experiences, there were many times when I'm in the archive and I worried I was empathizing too much with the historical sources, whose stories I was reading. And this was especially profound when I was in Chicago at the American Medical Association, because they have this collection of historical artifacts and other kinds of documents relating to fake cures or fraud [accusations]. But amongst that collection there are thousands and thousands of letters from people all across the United States who wrote to the AMA asking for advice. And these letters are really personal, because they detailed their medical records, they detailed all the kinds of treatment that they had tried. And when I look through the deafness folder, there were thousands of people all telling their stories about dealing with stigma, sometimes with their own family members, having difficulty finding a job, and just begging for some kind of advice about what treatment to try, whether this advertised surgeon is reputable or whether this or that hearing aid would work for them. And I couldn't help but be emotionally overwhelmed by reading some of these stories. And in deciding which of these stories were going to go into the book, it was a very tough decision, because I couldn't put everything in there. So I really had to think about a way to distance myself from the sources. At the same time, I can say, my experiences as a deaf person also came from a place of strength, when I was working through the archive. I'll give you one example. I was looking through this paperwork of an African American man who had filed for work's compensation through a fraternal society and the archivist's notes mentioned that this person, in the bio, it said, this person was deaf and communicated through sign language and did not speak. In some of the forms that this person had to take to the bureaucratic office, on the back there were scribbles, and some of the scribbles said something like, "Do you understand?" Or "Go to room blah." And I thought, wait a minute, at this moment in time, this person, this African American man is communicating with a secretary or bureaucrat whoever, and because of the communication barriers, they have resorted to writing on the back of this paper. And then, it was something that was just like this light bulb moment for me, "Look at how this deaf person is communicating. And here is how it is fixed in the historical record." And this is something I could see very clearly and understand instinctively, because I do the same thing too. Sometimes I write notes, when I don't understand something or I ask someone to clarify what they're saying by just writing it down. But I never really thought this would be something I would come across in the archive, and it was really revealing for me to rethink how my own deafness shapes the way I interact with the archive. It doesn't always have to be this question about objectivity, sometimes it could be a source of strength, and I could extract information that, perhaps, able bodied people may not be able to.

Elizabeth Guffey: What kind of advice could you give to others about how to navigate that question of subjectivity versus objectivity?

Jaipreet Virdi: I don't really have an answer to that, because it is, quite honestly, something I still struggle with now, and I think it really depends on what your perspective is? Who are you writing for? Because sometimes you're writing public history for a general audience, the use of emotion as a writing strategy allows your narrative to become far more profound and it allows you to reach readers in a way you might not, if you don't have that emotion toll. So I encourage grad students to think about what their goal is when they're writing. Are they writing for their supervisor? Are they writing to publish in some literary magazine? And then, why or how, perhaps, this question about blurred boundaries between objectivity and subjectivity becomes an issue? And if it is an issue, what is it about that tension that is an issue? The only advice I can actually give is to just constantly rethink who you're writing for.

Elizabeth Guffey: I think also, though, you do a nice job situating your own particular situation in your writing and make it clear at the outset what your background and implicit biases are. Just positioning yourself is helpful also in that way. I want to turn to that idea of public history, because you really do have a nice profile of moving the discipline into new sorts of areas, and it's also in the way you talk about objects on social media. I wonder if we can just switch over for a little bit about how you've situated your scholarly work in disability studies or material culture studies online. You say on your website that you're "prolific on Twitter" and that you "use the platform to raise awareness of medical inequities, social justice, and disability rights." But you've also written about how social media platforms are really a form of mutual exchange and a scholarly tool. Could you, maybe, describe that process and that practice? Maybe, how you found a productive kind of way dealing with one's scholarship?

Jaipreet Virdi: Well, social media, for many people, is an accessibility thing. It allows scholars who might not necessarily have access to conventional academic spaces to engage in scholarly conversation. Years ago, as a PhD student, I used to be a blogger, so I would often write extracts about my research or things I was reading. I was really circulating among a very small community in the history of science, who were thinking about the importance of public history and moving away from skepticism about whether or not blogging is actually a scholarly tool. To be honest, blogging, and engaging with readers on Twitter or Facebook or sometimes even in the comment section of my blog, allowed me to constantly improve on my writing. My writing started to change from being very jargon laden and academic, and I started to develop a very great skill in disseminating complex and complicated ideas for a public who might not have read the ten books that are required by all PhD students, for example. But somebody who might actually be interested in the history and want to learn more about it. So my blog, which was called, "From the Hands of Quacks," and that's the same title as my dissertation, became a way for me to engage with general readers that way. I would often have conversations in which they would ask me questions about medical history or disability history or the history of science, and I would end up writing a multiple thread answer using primary sources. And it became really useful, because for one, it allowed me to better harness my writing technique, again, take complicated ideas and strip them in a way that's easily digestible by anybody. It also allowed me to become quite familiar with digitized resources online that I know where to find primary sources. And what ends up happening is that I also started to rely on social media conversations

for developing expertise that I might not necessarily have. One example I can think of actually occurred last year when I was on a travel grant at the Medical Library at Yale University, and I was working with the Robert Bogdan collection of disability. It was an amazing collection. And I was struggling with identifying some of the nineteenth-century wheelchairs that I was seeing in photographs, because these wheelchairs had these complicated gears and levers. And I couldn't figure out what that was, I had not seen it. I had read about it in other people's work, but I have never really seen this many photographs of it, and I didn't know if it was something that was specially crafted or mass produced. It was not my area of specialty. So I put the question on Twitter, "what is this?" My initial guess was, it was something for helping a person raise himself on and off the wheelchair. But other experts, who use wheelchairs and who use bicycles pointed out that, "No, it is for manually moving the wheelchair, the same way you would use a bicycle. These are bicycle gears." I don't ride a bicycle. I don't know how to ride a bicycle. So the gears aspect of the wheelchair did not come immediately to mind for me, but it did for other people. So that was a really interesting exercise in how the boundaries between who's an expert and who's the researcher, was completely blurred on social media. And it has become really wonderful and sometimes other people will chime in to a conversation I'm having, very publicly, and share their own research, bring their own insight, and it turns the work into this masterful collaborative space. I started doing the deaf history series on Twitter over the spring. I was cleaning out my office, and there were all these resources on archive material that I had kept and meant to file away, and I thought, "Oh, wouldn't it be great if I just started sharing some of these stories." I had one of these experiences when I didn't have enough information on a particular historical figure, and this was on Caroline Lambert, who was an "it girl" in the 1930s, and she did all these burlesque dances. So her story seemed really lively, but I had no idea what happened to her after the second World War, and I posted the story on Twitter, and one of my followers cited, "I think this is from the generational Lambert family that came over from Scotland." And I was like, "Okay, I don't know who these people are." And then, low and behold, one of the persons who was reading the story happened to be the great grandson of the historical figure I was writing about, and they started filling in the rest of the story, which was wonderful. Because this is something that I think, again, goes back to what I was saying about disability history being concepts. So not something that was completed in the archive research, but something that was completed with these kinds of conversations that we're having with each other.

Elizabeth Guffey: Would you say that that success or that lively community that you found on social media also has stimulated your efforts for online archiving? Maybe you should say a few words here—I'd be interested for you to describe your interest in preservation and this online archive that you're establishing.

Jaipreet Virdi: Since 2015, I've been working on a project called, Objects of Disability. It was initially my postdoctoral project that was based in Ontario, in Canada, where I collaborated with approximately forty archive libraries and museums to create a database of disability artifacts, anything that librarians and archivists would identify as disability artifacts in their collections. So I was just collecting this database, and my goal with this was to a) share the

database amongst other institutions, so it was like behind the scenes private collection, and b) extract some of the objects and put them online as a way to tell stories about disabled peoples' lived experiences with the technologies, how they modified their devices, why they made these devices, what they were used for, and how they ended up in museum collections. I am restarting it for 2021. And one goal I had in mind, and this goes back to what you were saying about social media and expertise, there is going to be a section of the website that would allow disabled people to upload their own stories. So they can claim authorship of their own history, and write them up, look at whatever archive collection they have in their own family histories, perhaps, take photographs of the objects, write this and share it, because so much of disability history, as you know, is not kept in museum and archive collections, and it's forgotten. And sometimes there's really interesting hacks that people make to adjust to their circumstances or their environment, and all of these things are really important histories, but may not always be materialized in a way that's deemed to be preservable in more formal collections. So I wanted to create an accessible digital space for anybody to share their history, and to feel comfortable doing so. And I want it to be autonomous in that there wouldn't really be any major editorial oversight. I mean obviously, I would monitor to make sure that whatever people share is appropriate. I was really influenced by, how a few years ago, there was that disability stories hashtag on Twitter, where people were just sharing all their stories, and of course, I'm really following the lead of Alice Wong's, wonderful Disability Visibility series, where she does these interviews with disabled people as a way to record their stories. So that's the section of Objects of Disability will be focused on, but it will be mostly focused on objects.

Elizabeth Guffey: For people who are not familiar with the type of objects that you're describing, I had pulled up that prosthetic arm, maybe, you could just describe it for a moment.

Jaipreet Virdi: In the late nineteenth century, a man by the name of Andrew Gawley, who lived in northern Ontario, in Canada, he had his hands amputated after an accident with a chainsaw. The hospital where he was receiving treatment gave him conventional prosthetic arms. The problem with the prosthetic arms Gawley received from the hospital is that they were useful if you lost one hand, not if you were a double amputee, because you need one working hand in order to put the other on. So Gawley asked his father, who was blind, and here we're getting different layers of disability here, to help him design a new prosthetic that did not look like an ordinary hand, but actually has an iron grip with five stages of grip, so that Gawley could teach himself how to write, how to dress himself, how to build things, how to hold a rifle, and one of his arms are kept at the Grey Roots Museum in northern Ontario and the other one is in Meaford Museum. They are similar in design but different. That's the kind of material histories I'm looking for. That's the kind of object history that I include in the database.

Elizabeth Guffey: And all of it comes together into this really rich tapestry as you start to describe it, and especially as I'm imagining the future projects as well. So, Jai, I have to say, thank you so much for all this insight and the directions you're talking about taking the discipline, and I would say, more broadly than just disability studies but material culture as well are just fascinating. All right. Good to see you, and thank you.

Jaipreet Virdi: Thank you for having me.

Fields of the Future is brought to you by Bard Graduate Center. Our producers are Emily Reilly and Laura Minsky. Art Direction by Jocelyn Lau. Sound design, editing, and composition by Palmer Hefferan. Special Thanks to Amy Estes, Jesse Merandy, Peter Miller, Stowe Nelson, Nadia Rivers, Susan Tane, Hellyn Teng, Maggie Walter, and Susan Weber.