

Honoring Arnaldo Rios-Soto & Charles Kinsey: Achieving Liberation Through Disability Solidarity



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Arnaldo Rios-Soto & Charles Kinsey are grounded at an intersection. Kinsey is laying flat on his back with his arms nearly ninety degrees up in the air. Rios-Soto is seated, cross-legged at the feet of Kinsey looking toward Kinsey moments before a police officer shot Kinsey.

When a Black Disabled person is killed by the state, media and prominent racial justice activists usually report that a Black person was killed by the police. Contemporaneous reports from disability rights communities regarding the very same individual usually emphasize that a Disabled or Deaf individual was killed by the police — with not one word about that person’s race, ethnicity or indigenous roots.

In the wake of Charles Kinsey taking a bullet marked for Arnaldo Rios this week, I am renewing the call for Disability Solidarity. Disability solidarity means disability communities actively working to create racial justice, and [non-disability] civil rights communities showing up for disability justice.

Arnaldo Rios is an Autistic Latinx adult who likely belongs to various race, ethnic, gender, disability, and other communities (I am maintaining gender neutrality here because I do not have first-hand information from Arnaldo about their gender and I want to honor and respect their identity). Charles Kinsey is a Black behavioral therapists

who was supporting Arnaldo during what seems to have been a sensory overload or emotional crisis that landed him stimming with a toy in the middle of the street.

According to the police union, we have only the poor marksmanship of a North Miami police officer to thank for Arnaldo and Charles not being lost to us. The union could give some credit to Charles Kinsey's swift thinking, calm demeanor and intense emotional labor in the most traumatic of conditions for their lives being spared. But hey, I guess that may be asking a bit too much.

All I know for sure is this: two people were grounded at an intersection. They posed no threat. A police officer shot at one, hit the other, & traumatized both for life.

I also know that this happens time, and time, and time again to Deaf and Disabled Black, Indigenous, Latinx & brown people. And somehow, police are never held to account.

Now, as much as I want to address how irresponsible, inappropriate and incorrect media and activists have been regarding even the most mundane information they share about disability and autism, I simply do not have the capacity (i.e., spoons) to do so. Seriously, the fact that in 2016, people continue to refer to an autistic adult as a child; and continue to equate autism with mental illness, and sensory overload with suicidal is beyond astounding and exhausting. Alas, our society and institutions are wholly run by able-bodied, neurotypical people. So it comes as no surprise to disabled and neurodivergent people that ableism abounds in reporting on, responding to and organizing around disability. But it is utterly exhausting.

Radical societal ableism also explains why police officers and alleged 911 callers do not understand the difference between homicidal and suicidal. Here's a hint: too often cops are the former, and those killed at their hands, the latter.

I digress. Arguably more important than the media and activists making flagrant errors when they finally decide to discuss disability, is the particular penchant both have for wholesale erasure of [inconvenient] identities of multiply-marginalized people who experience violence at the hands of the state. This, when we know, that the recurring tragedy is not found on one side of the road or the other. It is death at the intersection.

An intersection that far too many actively circumvent. The intersection that Arnaldo and his therapist occupy day in, day out. The intersection they occupied this Monday, when

both of their lives were mere moments from vanishing into thin air — just like those of Quintonio LeGrier and Bettie Jones who occupied that intersection before them.

Thousands have been profiled, criminalized and killed by the police simply for existing at the intersection of their own disability *and* race or indigeneity.

Here is the cold, hard, inconvenient truth:

Over half of those killed by law enforcement annually are people with disabilities. These murdered disabled individuals also are disproportionately Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and people of color.

And so, I am here to remind us all that erasure of disability in reporting and advocacy is the height of irresponsibility in journalism and activism. Regardless of intention, erasure only serves to further delay the end of state violence against racialized people and people with disabilities.

All of this being said, I have very little hope of news media abandoning its long-standing and deeply-ingrained divisive, dismissive and destructive reporting tactics. And so, I pen the note below to my comrades in the struggle for collective liberation — as a warning that these single-story narratives stand in the way of everything we are fighting for. This is our reminder that freedom is nigh, and that our shackles come undone *only* when we move as one.

. . .

Comrade:

Why can so many of us effortlessly engage in nuanced discussion of *white supremacist capitalist cis hetero patriarchal imperialism* and yet be completely incapable of identifying ableism?

If you are attempting to dismantle white supremacist capitalist cis hetero patriarchal imperialism without actively engaging in anti-ableism work, you are doing it all wrong. Ableism, together with other more commonly discussed oppressions within social justice

circles, undergird every institution. Indeed, racism, sexism, classism and transantagonism depend on ableism.

And so, our journey of unpacking privilege can not end with race, gender identity/presentation, socioeconomic or immigration status.

If your liberation journey ends short of disability justice, you too are complicit in perpetuating violence on and within your own community. Though rarely discussed, disability is represented across race and ethnicity, socioeconomic class and gender identity. Notably, and for reasons that are a matter for another piece, Black, Latinx and Indigenous people; low and no income community members; trans* and gender non-conforming individuals, and womxn, are all disproportionately represented in the class of disability.

We all lose when we are unaware of or dishonest about common and overlapping experiences of marginalized communities in education and income inequality; police brutality, wrongful arrests and convictions; and mass incarceration and rights violations in carceral settings. More to the point, we will never get free if we reduce people or communities down to a single identity for political, reporting or activist convenience.

Disability is the tie that binds. And so, it is impossible to achieve justice without achieving disability justice. Thus, if you are not naming and addressing racism *and* ableism in your actions, you are fighting a losing battle.

Our communities experience common and overlapping oppressions that require an advocacy framework that cuts across identities & movements. Here are just a few examples of common and overlapping oppression our communities face in the criminal legal system:

- Despite people with disabilities comprising twenty percent of our population, studies estimate that no less than half of the people killed by the police annually are people with disabilities, and that disabled people represent between sixty and eighty percent of our adult incarcerated population.
- Suspension rates are 1 in 6 for Black children, but increase to 1 in 4 for Black children with disabilities.

- Children with disabilities are 3 times more likely to be placed in the foster care system, 4 times more likely to be living in poverty and 6 times more likely to end up in the juvenile legal system than children without disabilities.
- A startling 65% of boys & 75% of girls in kid prisons have at least one mental illness & up to 85% of children in kid prisons have at least one disability.

Similarly, incarceration statistics for incarcerated Black and Latinx people also are grossly disproportionate. Black and Latinx people make up a quarter of the US population but represent nearly 60% of the incarcerated population.

Our jails and prisons are quite literally overflowing with people of color *with* disabilities.

Or, take disenfranchisement: States across the country have passed measures to make it harder for black people and people with disabilities to exercise their “fundamental right” to vote. For instance, felon disenfranchisement laws mean that today, 2.2 million Black Americans — and many millions more with disabilities — are prohibited from casting a ballot despite having completed their sentences. Moreover, although it is rarely discussed, disenfranchisement of people with felony records and people with disabilities can often be found within the same section of law. The exclusion of one group is often used to defend the exclusion of the other.

I could continue, but I will stop here because the pattern is the same within *every* institution.

Simply put, it is impossible to address the crisis of state violence without addressing the systematic failure of the state to provide equal access to education, employment, housing, and resources for people of color *and* people with disabilities — who, for myriad reasons, often are one and the same. These inequalities are inextricably linked.

Narratives and statistics make clear that the important and necessary conversations on racial justice that are occurring now cannot be fully had without disability justice at their center.

To be sure, disability and deaf communities of color are disproportionately impacted by state violence. Even still, most resourced disability rights organizations refuse to take action to end the crisis of racialized people with disabilities dying in our schools, streets,

homes and prisons; whilst resourced non-disability civil rights entities dishonor the lives of the same people by failing to uplift their whole humanity. This, even when these resourced entities claim to be fighting for justice “in their name.”

Accountable advocacy demands more. It demands that we engage in activism that cuts across identities, communities and movements — that we understand and engage in disability solidarity wherein all of us are working toward racial justice, economic justice and disability justice.

This is not an easy task but it is necessary for life, love and liberation. I have come up with some questions for racial justice activists and for disability justice activists to help you on your journey.

If you engage in social justice actions to bring about racial & economic justice, ask yourself:

1. Am I exploring disability in conversations about power, privilege and structural inequality?
2. Am I centering disabled activists/people in actions?
3. Am I honoring and celebrating the whole humanity of those disabled activists/people that I centered?
4. Am I reminding people that trauma is both a cause and consequence of disability — that trauma can stem from witnessing violence; experiencing the loss of loved ones; and from housing, income and food insecurity, among other things?
5. Am I uplifting the truth that people with disabilities are disproportionately overrepresented in communities of color, LGBTransQ/GNC communities, and low and no income communities?
6. When I discuss enslavement, genocide, mass incarceration, and other state violence, am I naming intergenerational trauma & disability?
7. Is my decarceration/abolition work truly intersectional — have I analyzed the impact of state violence and mass incarceration on my Disabled, Deaf, DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing community members?

8. Does my coalition/cohort have non-token/inspiration Deaf or Disabled leadership of color?
9. Can I reach out to any other deaf/disability justice coalitions & am I competent and sensitive to the cultural and cross-cultural dynamics that will stem from this communication/encounter?
10. Is this action for racial/economic justice universally accessible?

If you engage in social justice actions to bring about disability justice, ask yourself:

1. Am I exploring rac[e/ism] in conversations about power, privilege and structural inequality?
2. Am I centering Deaf and Disabled Black, Latinx, Indigenous, Brown activists/people in actions?
3. Am I honoring and celebrating the whole humanity of the Black, Latinx, Indigenous, Brown activists/people that I centered?
4. Am I reminding people that racism & race-based violence is a cause and consequence of poverty and disability?
5. Am I uplifting the truth that Black, Latinx, Indigenous, Brown people are disproportionately represented within most every disability/deaf community?
6. When I discuss audism, ableism, sanism, am I discussing the long-lasting effects of enslavement, genocide, forced familial separation, mass incarceration, poverty and other state violence?
7. Is my deaf/disability “rights” work truly intersectional — have I analyzed the impact of state violence on Black, Latinx, Indigenous, Brown Deaf/Disabled community members?
8. Does my coalition/cohort have non-token/inspiration Deaf/Disabled Black, Latinx, Indigenous, Brown leadership?
9. Can I reach out to any other economic/racial/gender/indigenous justice coalitions, & am I competent and sensitive to the cultural and cross-cultural dynamics that will

stem from this communication/encounter?

10. Is this action for disability justice universally accessible & intentionally intersectional?

We can begin here. This will lead us to a place where deaf/disability justice activists and racial justice activists become one and the same. This is critical intersectionality. This is Disability Solidarity.

Will centering disability make your advocacy a bit more intricate? Yes.

Will you have to be more critical about your use of ableist language during your actions? Absolutely.

Will you have to ensure that your actions are universally accessible? Of course.

Will you be uncomfortable with your privilege(s) for a while? Likely so.

Give thanks. This is the gift of accountability.

You will come away with a deeper understanding of structural oppression, state violence, radical inclusion, others, yourself and your role in the movement.

We will come away with our freedom.

So, the next time you are having a nuanced discussion of white supremacist capitalist cis hetero patriarchal imperialism, please include and be honest about ableism, audism, sanism and your privilege(s) as related to each of these.

And the next time someone asks you who Tanisha Anderson, Paul Castaway, Freddy Centeno, Ezell Ford, Norma “Angie” Guzman, Milton Hall, Freddie Gray, Laquan McDonald, Natasha McKenna, Jamycheal Mitchell, John T. Williams, or Mario Woods are, tell them the truth.

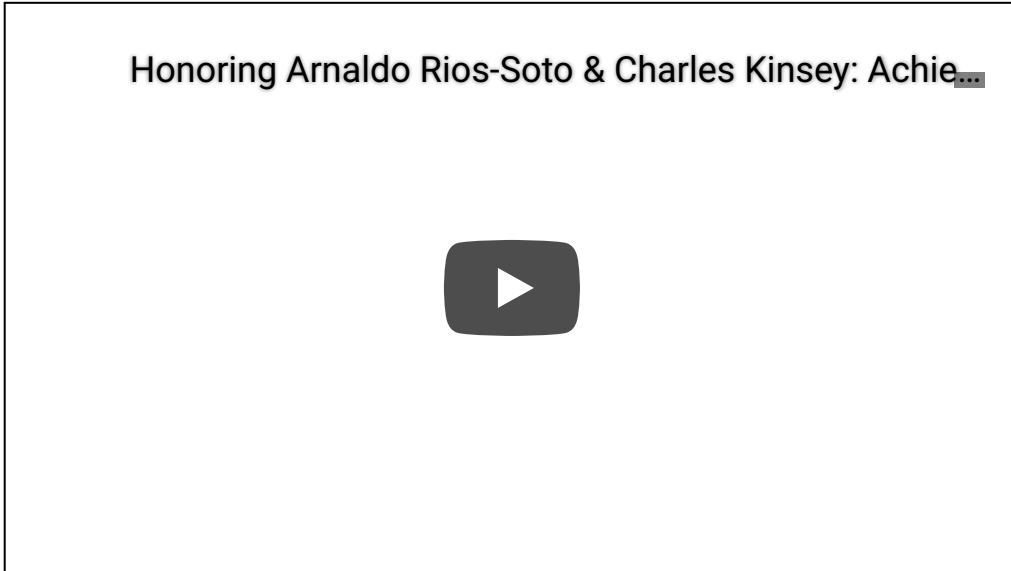
Tell them the whole truth:

These are our kindred — our Black, Indigenous, Latinx Disabled kindred.

They were killed by the state.

Their lives mattered.

This piece was originally published on my blog under the same title. This piece has been translated into American Sign Language and is posted here.



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