

Excerpt from Sandra Alland's essay "Nothing About Us Without Us, No One Left Behind", from *Stairs and Whispers: D/deaf and Disabled Poets Write Back* (eds Alland, Barokka, Sluman, Nine Arches, 2017).

Writing *by* disabled and Deaf people is foundational to this anthology, but also writing *to* – there is resistance and strength in refusing to seek the normative world's approval, in creating our own stories in our own ways, and in telling them to each other in our own spaces (whether that be in person or online). In many cases and historically, our disabled and Deaf co-conspirators might have been the only ones listening, watching, reading or touching us. They are the ones who have given us value. They are our main concern.

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When you can't even get into the room, how do you participate? And then the question eventually becomes, do you want to participate in that particular room – or do you prefer to make a new room, and let others come to you on your terms?

But let's start with that room – because we often need access to that room to survive.

Most poetry readings are held in inaccessible spaces; there's no step-free entrance to the building, the reading is in the basement, there's no British Sign Language interpreting or captions, or there are no single and accessible gender-neutral toilets. Despite these being the most basic of access requirements, most non-disabled people who lead reading series and festivals still don't commit to providing them. As a writer seeking to be published, you're generally required to read publicly – but you can't.

The barriers to disabled and Deaf poets participating in reading and publishing go far beyond the wheelchair-accessible building. Fewer even than accessible spaces for audiences are accessible stages; it seems not to occur to most people that a disabled person might be behind the mic. Other considerations include: freedom from loud and distracting background noise and fluorescent or flashing lights; lip-speaking and deaf-blind interpreting; a location that can be reached by affordable and accessible public transit; and provision of speech-to-text, large print, Braille, audio description, easy English, comfortable chairs, quiet space outside of the main performance space, a scent-free environment and relaxed performances.

And then there's the being invited in the first place. Because the main barrier tends to be in the imagination, in the fact that most non-disabled and hearing people don't even think about reading, watching or listening to disabled and Deaf writers. They don't imagine our existence at all, except perhaps as bad metaphors for their own work.

The spoken word scene, for example, often demands that writers do not read from the page; it's inherently ableist to assume everyone can memorise (or be anxiety-free). There's also a focus on smooth and fast talking and on meticulous time-keeping, which can exclude people with stammers or stutters, Deaf people, people with cerebral palsy, people who speak quietly or not at all, people who shout or tic, neurodivergent people, people with learning difficulties, in mental distress, in chronic pain or on medication.

Another barrier that isn't considered is the social barrier. Many disabled people don't or can't go out much, for reasons including but not exclusive to the physical and mental inaccessibility of events. And social networking in person is one of the foundations of 'getting ahead'. If disabled and Deaf people can't get to the party and don't drink with those in power, we are unlikely to be remembered when opportunities arise. Also, plans get made in bars, often the posher ones – places that tend to be not only inaccessible but also additionally unfriendly to people who are racialised or BIPOC, trans or gender non-conforming, queer, working class, non-English-speaking, or non-drinking.

For non-disabled/hearing and disabled/Deaf people alike, access is a learning curve. The easiest way to begin this journey is to lose one's defensiveness when a disabled person highlights their exclusion. It takes time and commitment to become accessible, and it's almost impossible to be accessible to all people at all times. But hopefully more and more organisers and fellow poets will begin to seriously contemplate the phrase 'leave no one behind' – and make efforts towards access, following the lead of disabled and Deaf people.