LAURA FLANDERS & FRIENDS

ALICE WONG'S LEGACY: HOW “DISABILITY VISIBILITY” STRENGTHENS EVERY LIBERATION MOVEMENT

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LAURA FLANDERS: Alice Wong lived longer than she expected to live, but absolutely not long enough. When she died in November 2025, public grief showed up everywhere. Wong was hailed as an oracle, a visionary, the first disabled public intellectual, and her loss was mourned by Asian Americans, disability justice activists, writers, journalists, editors and colleagues in the movement against genocide in Gaza and beyond. She was mourned by feminists, anti-racists, scholars, healthcare workers, hackers, masses of social media followers, and StoryCorps colleagues. By people inside the institutions of philanthropy and government where she'd served and by the many, many so-called outsiders who read her stunning memoir, "Year Of The Tiger, An Activist's Life". So who was Alice Wong? For us, she was one of those great guests who got away. We never got a chance to talk with author, activist, editor Alice Wong in life, so today we've invited two people who knew her well and collaborated with her onto the program to celebrate her astonishing life. Sandy Ho is the Executive Director of the Disability & Philanthropy Forum, and partnered with Alice Wong and Mia Mingus in the Access Is Love campaign. Steven Thrasher is the author of "The Viral Underclass: The Human Toll When Inequality and Disease Collide", and a Professor. He is the Daniel Renberg Chair of Social Justice in Reporting at the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern, but he was suspended from teaching classes there after speaking out, as Alice Wong did, on Palestine. Thrasher wrote a gorgeous remembrance of Wong on the literary platform Lit Hub. Welcome, both. I am really so honored and happy to be with you today. How did you both meet Alice Wong? How did you first encounter her? Sandy.

SANDY HO: I first met her back in the days of Skype, and this was about 15 years ago. And at the time I was working at a young women's mentoring program for young disabled women who were mentored by older disabled women. And I myself was also seeking my own role models and I came across Alice Wong's letter to her own younger Asian American disabled girl. And I essentially cold emailed her and very generously responded, and we just fell into a very long conversation where she asked me a lot about myself and and my family.

LAURA FLANDERS: Beautiful. What about you, Steven? How did you and Alice connect?

STEVEN THRASHER: We first connected through Twitter, and as other people noted, Alice was the epitome of the good days of Twitter. And I believe we first started interacting around 2014, 2015. I was a writer for "The Guardian" and I was reporting on the Michael Brown shooting in Ferguson, Missouri and really covered the Black Lives Matter Movement in depth for a couple of years. And I think I started interacting with Alice about that. She was both interested and a supporter of the Black Lives Matter movement. But I think we first initially interacted when we were writing about how many people who were disabled were affected by police violence. And it wasn't just that Black men were disproportionately being killed by police, but it was people who were disabled who often either didn't know how to respond to police commands or were confused by them.

LAURA FLANDERS: So that our audience can meet her at least virtually, we're going to play a part of the video that the MacArthur Foundation made when they awarded her their much-vaunted 2024 Genius Award. Here's some of that.

> ALICE WONG: Disability is so much more than pain, trauma and tragedy. There's creativity, adaptation, and talent that comes from living in a non-disabled world. I'm Alice Wong, and I am a writer, editor and disability justice activist. Disabled people hunger to see themselves accurately depicted, and I built my platform because there are so few spaces for us in bias. As a writer and editor, I address the lack of disabled voices in publishing, journalism and popular culture and illustrate the systemic ableism that renders disabled people as disposable burdens and objects of pity. Storytelling is a powerful form of resistance. It leaves evidence that we were here in the society that devalues, excludes and eliminates us. Eugenics is not a thing of the past. Many people think having a disability like mine is a fate worse than death. The systemic ableism that I and millions of us face every day tells us that we don't matter, that our lives are too expensive and not worth saving. I want to change the way people think about disability from something one dimensional and negative to something more complex and nuanced. There's such diversity, joy and abundance in the lived disabled experience. We are multitudes.

LAURA FLANDERS: In your gorgeous remembrance on Lit Hub, Steven, you wrote quote, "Alice helped decolonize disability communities of their often white-centered nature and acted as a bridge between so many interdependent related struggles." Can you elaborate on that?

STEVEN THRASHER: Yeah, it's, you know, Sandy said, Alice was very much an Asian American woman, and a lot of disability writing as I first came to it was often quite white-centered. Alice was brilliant in writing about her own experiences of an Asian American woman, and I remember talking to her about the ways that she had been conditioned as a disabled Asian American woman to be conditioned to try, you know, to accept crumbs, to not complain, to be very docile. And so I thought that she was really brilliant in bridging together not just Asian American communities, but queer communities, LGBTQ communities, all the communities where your body is made to feel like it doesn't belong. I initially saw that, you know, most strongly with the Black Lives Matter movement, we connected a lot talking, as COVID started, talking about my own research on HIV and AIDS and the ways that LGBTQ communities, many are disabled and many were disabled through the experiences of COVID. And then towards the end of her life, of course she just went full tilt for Palestine. And the fact that she and her two friends raised $3 million for eSims for people to use phones was really amazing. And she did, you know, I think that she had a straight up interest in the Palestinian community and alliance, but she also really used a disability frame that was a, you know, that was a powerful. We were seeing people made disabled on videos. We ended up having the, the biggest cohort of disabled children ever recorded.

LAURA FLANDERS: We've had actress-comedian Maysoon Zayid on this program who's talked about the Palestine crisis as a disability crisis, a mental health crisis. I'm coming to you, Sandy. Speaking specifically as an Asian American woman, what would you add to this picture of how she sort of decolonized our sense of disability?

SANDY HO: Yeah, I think what made Alice's storytelling and her just very inquisitive and excellent journalist questions was that she got down to right, right down to what are the issues and subject matter that both were not necessarily, you know, willing to go there, and she always was. And you know, as an Asian American disabled woman, we also like, we're friends and so we talked about our experiences. So one that comes to mind is we were actually very proud of being, both having been Chinese school dropouts.

LAURA FLANDERS: [Laura laughs] You mean, failing to learn Mandarin properly?

SANDY HO: Exactly. And, you know, that the idea in the ways that ableism, right? As a system of oppression and as a force that required and expect not just our body mind to produce, but also to fit and to be a certain way was constantly that point in which Alice's storytelling and her Disability Visibility Project media platform really pointed towards.

LAURA FLANDERS: Intersectionality was a big part of what Alice Wong embodied and talked about and worked on, and her work around the making those intersections visible

started long before she won a MacArthur or even before she started that Disability Visibility Project, which we'll talk about in a minute. Here's her telling one of her healthcare stories for the Disability Rights, Education and Defense Fund back in 2012.

> ALICE WONG: And I was like, well, you know, I don't really need it now. I feel like I like using the bi-pap. I don't want to get too invasive. And this is what he said, he says, "Oh, is it an issue of vanity?" And I was like, "Vanity?" He is like, "Oh yeah, I understand you're a young woman, you might be concerned about how you look." And I was like, "That is the least thing I really cared about." I mean, I was concerned about infections, I was concerned about being dependent on a machine. I mean, what if the battery dies? I'm, you know, to me that's really frightening. And I was trying to, you know, convey that these are my wishes, that in our conversations, in our long-range plan, I want him to know I'm the kind of patient that wants non-invasive measures as much as possible until I really need it. And I feel like it didn't really reach him because I guess, you know, why wouldn't a patient want an intervention? So that to me was interesting that there's this intersection of gender where he thought it was a vanity issue. And to me that was totally like not on my mind at all. And it really annoyed me and it really got me really angry.

LAURA FLANDERS: So that was Alice Wong talking in 2012, and we should say there's much more of that. And she goes on and talks about how she doesn't get the pelvic exams, the GYN exams that she should, because there isn't a single table at her local gynecologist that can accommodate her comfortably. Coming back to you, Sandy, you know, how much has changed? That was 2012.

SANDY HO: You know, I wish that I could say and tell everybody that we have made significant gains and progress, but the reality is that we have not. And a lot of Alice's advocacy, which focused around also the systems that force disabled people to be at the margin and not have the kind of powerful political voice and attention that her storytelling and advocacy constantly shone a light on. When we think about the, whether it is the Black Lives movement matter that Steven was talking about, or the pandemic especially, we see the ways in which our society and political systems respond and not in ways that prioritize those who are least privileged and have the least amount of power, but those who are already like expecting a certain way of normalizing how we go about doing things. And as the pandemic continued, so many of our peers, our other institutions and just social gatherings even had returned to this idea of going back to, you know, pre-pandemic, this myth of normalizing what it was like beforehand. And the reality is that it wasn't better and it wasn't good and there was no equality or equity prior to the pandemic in terms of the ways that people were able to, or not able to

get access to basic fundamental resources like healthcare, like housing, like access to employment.

LAURA FLANDERS: And now fast forward, the same administration that is sending arms and weapons around the world, Steven, is shredding safety nets back home. Not that they were in great shape before, as Sandy pointed out, but it wasn't even days into the new administration, but Donald Trump was out there blaming non-existent disabled air traffic controllers for that American Airlines crash in D.C. He's then gone on to basically expunge enforcement of accommodations for people with disability. There's no ASL interpreters now at the press conferences at the White House.

STEVEN THRASHER: You were listening all these examples, and some of it might seem small, like Secretary of State Rubio changed the font back from Calibri to Times New Roman. They're even making fun, you know, under this word that I don't even like to use, woke, because it has a, it is a noble Black vernacular origin of what it means to be, you know, waking up to the world and understanding the world. And they're sort of saying, this font is woke, you know, we're going to get rid of it. But they know they're just doing it to distress people who are disabled and to create the idea that, you know, doing anything that accommodates people is somehow weak. It's also very misogynist. I think that, you know, they, they think it's feminine. They'll say it's gay, you know, this is the undercurrent of all they're doing, but they're really trying to torture people and exclude them who are trying to participate in their government.

LAURA FLANDERS: Alice first taught us a lot, I think, about what it takes to be disabled in this country in this time. We should say, she had a form of muscular dystrophy, and over her life, as you're seeing even in these clips, she changed. It took effect. Towards the end of her life she wrote devastatingly about what it was to have that tracheotomy and to have to use speech to, text to speech software and how it made her have to slow down and time was different. And she talked about cripping the world, what it was to crip the world. "To crip something," she wrote in "Teen Vogue", "Is to bend compress, twist, subvert, imbue disabled wisdom into systems, institutions and cultures." So I would ask you Sandy, you know, what is it? What is the cripping you're looking for from the society we live in?

SANDY HO: Well, one thing that I often think about, and particularly my role of leading an organization in the philanthropic sector, is what would it look like if our country actually budgeted for access? What does it look like for people with disabilities to belong and to not just belong in kind of the participatory sense of like, yay, I, you know, I get to be able to vote? And still in this country there are so many polling places that are inaccessible, but actually be able to take up space, take up political and economic

power. And the world that I imagined as disabled oracle Alice Wong perhaps envisioned as well is one that, you know, allowed all of us to just not just move about freely, but also on our own terms and with full bodily autonomy, right? That there is no hindrance to the ways in which people with disabilities can dream and can have families and have jobs. And also it's also okay if you don't want any of those things. Like that was something that was really powerful that Alice taught me. And when I think about that future, I am very concerned about the present in which that future is even going to happen. Because when we hear about the Right, dismantling of the Special Education Department in the U.S., the largest budget in our country, and of course students with disabilities spans into adulthood as well. But I think about the opportunities that I had, right, coming up as the Americans With Disabilities Act was passed, and some of the, vastly now different experiences that students with disabilities in public schools and private schools and colleges and universities are having their early education shuttered, already. And the reality is if we are not going to have a, right, thriving young people with disabilities, then we're not going to have disabled adults. We're not going to have disabled elders.

LAURA FLANDERS: That Disability Visibility Project that she began years ago is still going strong. It's still out there. People are recording their stories. What began as a collaboration with StoryCorps continues, and it's gotten much bigger. Steven, you interviewed Alice for your book on "The Viral Underclass". When you think about her contribution and the contribution of DVP, what do you want to pull out and lift up?

STEVEN THRASHER: Well, I mostly, the first words in my book are, "The world is one big Petri dish," which is something Alice said to me, that I think is so cosmic in its scale of how we have to think about relating to other living beings, including microorganisms we can't see. But I think the main thing I want to do is try to let her speak for herself. So my contribution that I'm trying to make to this is that I, I had a 70-minute Zoom interview with her for my book. And we talked about, when she could no longer speak, we talked about, you know, do you want to release this? And she thought about it, and she was actually thinking about using it for some process, maybe to make her text-to-voice sound more like herself. And after she passed, I made the decision that I would make it public. I think she would be fine with that because I want people to be able to hear it. It's 70 minutes mostly just of her. And she's so wise. And I really do think that she's going to be a philosopher of our time that's, you know, that lasts for decades and centuries because she was such a unique and beautiful and forward thinker.

LAURA FLANDERS: After her passing, Sandy, she asked you to post a message to social media. Do you have that there? Would you be willing to share that message?

SANDY HO: Yes, yes. And I just also want to preface this by saying that at the time of her passing, I was in Boston. And so where I said my first hellos to Alice was also where I said my goodbyes. I got the text message from her sister letting me know that Alice wanted me to post this message that I can read. "Hi, everyone. It looks like I ran out of time. I have so many dreams that I wanted to fulfill and plans to create new stories for you. There are a few in progress that might come to fruition in a few years if things work out. I did not ever imagine I would live to this age and end up a writer, editor, activist, and more. As a kid riddled with insecurity and internalized ableism, I could not see a path forward. It was thanks to friendships and some great teachers who believed in me that I was able to fight my way out of miserable situations into a place where I finally felt comfortable in my skin. We need more stories about us and our culture. You all, we all deserve the everything and more in such a hostile ableist environment. Our wisdom is incisive and unflinching. I'm honored to be your ancestor and believe disabled oracles like us will light the way to the future. Don't let the bastards grind you down. I love you all."

LAURA FLANDERS: Oh, thank you, Sandy. So here's Alice Wong speaking in her own voice with her friend and colleague, Mia Mingus, telling a story for the Disability Visibility Project released in 2016.

> ALICE WONG: In your blog, you write, "We must leave evidence. Evidence that we were here, that we existed, that we survived and loved. Evidence of who we were, who we thought we were, who we never should have been. [gentle music] Evidence that there are other ways to live. Past survival, past isolation." I do wonder what kind of mark I'll leave. I think about that a lot, and hopefully this is something we can leave for everyone to enjoy.

LAURA FLANDERS: I'll ask the two of you the question I ask all our guests as we close, and that is, what do you think is the story that the future, that future that you just talked about, will tell of us? What do you think the future, I don't know, 25, 50, 100 years will say about us? Steven?

STEVEN THRASHER: Unfortunately, we will look at the possibility of what COVID offered us to reorganize the world. And we saw glimpses of it. We saw a massive spending on public health. We saw a lot of interdependence, people acting to save millions of lives. And it gave us a blueprint for how to move forward in a much more equitable way, anchored in racial justice and disability justice. And we're seeing a really terrifying dismantling of every shred of how that happened, not just the vaccine infrastructure, but the vaccines themselves. And I think Alice's voice will be one that is

looked at in the future, of understanding exactly what was happening in 2020 as the ramp up happened and as it was dismantled as well.

SANDY HO: In the future, I know that activists and the legacy that had been left by them will continue to shine a light on the ways that activism requires us to hold institutions and foundation and organizations, governments accountable to our communities. And you know, as Alice being one of them, I hope that the future also recognizes and tells stories of how communities still found each other and not just found respite and care of one another in solidarity, but also found joy. Because at the end of the day, and in the end of this chapter of our time together, we have each other, and that's the enduring lesson that I've learned from the disability movement.

LAURA FLANDERS: Sandy, Steven, thank you so much for joining us. It's really been a pleasure to spend this time with you and your memories of Alice Wong.

STEVEN THRASHER: Thank you so much.

SANDY HO: Thank you.

LAURA FLANDERS: I've said it before, if you're not subscribed to our free newsletter, you are missing out, and that's because subscribers to our free newsletter receive the full, uncut version of every conversation every week. And that makes me happy because every week I am heartbroken about the good stuff that ends up on the cutting room floor for time. This episode, it was Sandy Ho announcing that the WordPress platform has committed to maintaining Alice Wong's website fully functional for the next 100 years. And that made me think about where we might be as a society a century hence. Will we 100 years from now be more fully and utterly capitalized, such that every human and planetary asset is maximized for private profit in the years ahead? Will we still be sending multimillion dollar, billion dollar missions to Mars and waging wars abroad, or will we perhaps have cripped ourselves a bit and understood that society's most valuable resources are right here, right now on Earth? Alice Wong taught us to relish the rare. We value rare metals on earth, so why not rare people and their potential and what we might learn from them if we listened more carefully to their needs, wants and desires? What might we learn about health and humanity and science and technology and our own humanity if we learned to listen more and better to all of those amongst us? I'm Laura Flanders for "Laura Flanders & Friends". I appreciate you. Thanks for joining us. Till the next time, stay kind, stay curious. We'll be back.

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