Education for Information 38 (2022) 339–346
DOI 10.3233/EFI-220055
IOS Press

CRT, information, and disability: An intersectional commentary

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Grounded in my perspective as a deaf, Black, and trans librarian who has worked in many Library and Information Science (LIS) roles, I argue in this paper that information scientists and professionals could close the gap in representation and information access by applying a knowledge of intersectionality to our work. I make the case for this by presenting examples of three Black historical "hidden figures" who shaped life as we know it in the USA, highlighting the erased dimensions of their lives as disabled people. Despite this geographical setting, these intersectional counter stories are relevant to addressing local areas of inequity in information access and resources worldwide.
This community commentary paper addresses a serious gap in scholarship and practice around the erasure of disability from both Black history and LIS theory and practice, and follows in the Critical Race Theory (CRT) traditions of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) and counter-storytelling (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) to bridge this gulf. Applying CRT and related concepts to LIS work prepares the ground for immediate and future needs for equitable access to resources, by acknowledging those who may be hindered by their racial/ableist/queerphobic biases and the way they may unknowingly play into systemic oppression, just by their participation. This will maintain relevance and contribute to the creation of equity for Black and brown marginalized LIS staff and community members going forward. Having additional systemic support for our most marginalized staff members would create ripple effects in information access and cultural competency in the way we are able to see barriers and opportunities, and the field as a whole would benefit.

Keywords: Intersectionality, CRT, diversity, equity, inclusion, DeafBlackTrans, disability, intersectional librarianship

CRT and disability

There's a gap in how we catalog information, and representation of Black disabled activists in history have fallen through that gap. CRT and disability require contextualization in order to be effective, and intersectionality completes the picture when this framework is considered in real life circumstances. Understanding intersectionality as a framework gives us tools to overcome limitations that occur when the complexity of the experiences of marginalized identities are not considered. The fields of LIS and CRT are beginning to have their own intersections, even as queerness and disability are becoming more visible in life and in cataloging (Annamma et al., 2018). There is already a dearth of Black and brown library and information professionals. The number of people in this field who are Black and brown as well as disabled and/or queer is unknown, not least because these areas of marginalization and stigmatized, and many people choose not to disclose unless they need accommodations. According

to the American Libraries Association (2017), white staff are more highly represented at over 86% of the library staffing. It is likely that the statistics around disability and queerness in library staff are also predominantly white. Existing literature on queerness or disability in cataloging often neglects to include race and how that further impacts accurate and equitable cataloging and representation. Consider that I had to get a Master's degree to become a librarian, as a Black, deaf and trans person, with minimal resources and support, in order to even perceive that this gap existed. More people should have knowledge of people like Harriet Tubman, Brad Lomax, and Marsha P. Johnson at an earlier age. My library skills and my frustration over the lack of information and support available regarding my disability, led me to the realization there was little to no information around Black, trans, disabled people and our information needs, and that applied across public, medical, and academic libraries in my experience as a long term library worker. I was further informed by research done by Annamma et al. (2018), which gave me new context on the role of disability and intersectionality and the role it plays in education and information access. Hints of this work and other works like that of Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018) and Leung and Lopez-McKnight (2021) are weaved throughout this paper, because the line of thinking in these publications challenged me to apply intersectionality as a tool to create inspired change in LIS.

Contextualizing intersectionality via real-world implications

Intersectionality is a Critical Race Theory framework that reveals how the systemic interlocking nature of multiple axes of societal oppression marginalizes individuals while contextualizing the ripple effects on society (Crenshaw, 1991). An understanding of intersectionality creates a deeper knowledge of how to combat the resulting kyriarchy.[1] For information sciences, this means, at minimum, having the culturally competent skill set to decide who is lacking support, and how to bridge those gaps in access, whether through community mapping or other means. As a deaf, Black, and trans librarian and information professional, discussions with my peers indicate that we, as intersectionally marginalized people, often have multiple experiences with oppression (whether as library staff or patrons) and can acknowledge the need to uplift marginalized voices, as well as having the means to work towards making marginalized people more visible (Leung & Lopez-McKnight, 2021). Despite this, many sources of information fail to include the intersectional marginalization of activists and, like those presented here, tend to fade into the background of history, or

[1] Kyriarchy is defined as multiple intersecting structures of oppression by Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza (1992), an ideal follow up counterpart to the concept of intersectionality as defined by Kimberle Crenshaw (1991). I am using these two as a juxtaposition between the societal structures that facilitate oppression (white supremacy, patriarchy,sexism, racism, etc.) and the identities (race, sex, class, ability, etc) and lives of the people who are affected by existing under these structures.

have parts of their identity erased. Information professionals could close this gap in information by applying a knowledge of intersectionality to library and information work.

Currently, we hear stories about Harriet Tubman, but we do not usually hear about her disability. If you look in the Library of Congress Subject headings, we see her listed under categories of "fugitive slaves" "African American" "abolitionists" and "females" but nothing pertaining to disability, rendering this axis invisible for any non-information professional conducting research on disability rights and representation (Library of Congress, 2020). We hear about the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), a landmark event for disability rights and accessibility, but we do not hear how Brad Lomax and the Black Panthers helped make it happen, and a result is that his white disabled peers are more completely documented in the available literature on disability rights (Connelly, 2020). Archivists and historians often omit Brad Lomax, intentionally or otherwise (Connelly, 2020). We hear about Marsha P. Johnson and the start of Pride as we know it, but while we know she was Black and trans, it is usually not mentioned that she was mentally disabled. Her mental illnesses informed the compassion and care she extended to her community. It is an unknown how modern queer history will be cataloged when countless Black queer activists are disabled. Their outspokenness often cuts them off by default from greater resources and acknowledgement (Vaden, 2022). There are not many Black librarians, and fewer still those who are further marginalized. This is assisted by the biased algorithms and institutions that execute this silencing, like how local law enforcement consistently suppressed Marsha, but on a global scale (Noble, 2018). How would our outlook of ability and activism change if we heard about the role of these disabled people in changing the world (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018)? How would things change if we recognized that the things these people are known for are possible *because* of their intersectional marginalization and disabilities? What drove these people to do the work they did other than deep empathy and the desire to help? Even if artificial intelligence scoured every available searchable mention of them in print, e-format, and memory, we still may not get answers.

There is a richness in history that is contextualized when people look to Critical Race Theory (CRT) through this intersectional lens. CRT asks us to recognize that these people were under supported and ignored as a direct result of being at the intersection of race and disability (Crenshaw, 1991). As information professionals, we must shine a light on the impact of these three people and others, and how their lives affected by intersectionality changed the world, paving the way for the activists and advocates of the present day, just by their documentation in American history. The information sciences offer some tools to change this, whether it is campaigning for more inclusive and detailed cataloging and research, looking thoughtfully at how the lessons of these marginalized lives play out in the present day through data analysis, or actively seeking out and supplying information services and funding to Black disabled organizations and activists, such as in examples set in *Knowledge Justice* (Leung & Lopez-McKnight, 2021).

Black and disabled: Shining a light through counterstories

Counter-storytelling is an established CRT methodology of telling the narratives of marginalized or hidden figures as a "tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege [to] help strengthen traditions of social, political, and cultural survival and resistance" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 32). In what follows, three such counter-stories are (re)presented to illuminate the hidden intersectional dimensions of disability in liberatory accounts of Black historical figures.

Bradley Lomax was a Black man with multiple sclerosis who was an active member of the Black Panther party, helping found the Washington chapter. Chuck Jackson provided Brad with accommodations as his attendant and peer. Brad made the early success of the disability rights movement possible, because he connected the white disability activists with the added community resources of the Black Panthers. This connection fed the movement and made it possible for Brad and his fellow disabled activists to succeed in the action known as the "504 Sit-In", in which approximately two dozen disabled people hosted a protest in a San Francisco building of the Federal agency known as the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. Section 504, also known as the 504 Regulations, was the first major piece of US legislation towards the civil rights of the disabled community (Connelly, 2020). This legislation went on to create the framework for disability rights today, most notably, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

In the present day US, Brad Lomax's work and influence resulted in a greater freedom for disabled people of all backgrounds. Because of his connections, and the trust he had built with his fellow disabled activists, he was able to advocate for aid and accommodations from his Black Panther peers in his disability rights work, creating a community support system for Black people with disabilities (Schweik, 2011). His work helped disabled people come out of the shadows of shame and join the rest of society via accessibility and community care. The documentation of his life has made clear that his work contributed to a world where these stories are acknowledged, enabling people with disabilities to fight for their rights. It is to be hoped that we will notice the lack of his inclusion in historical records in order to restore recognition of his place as a disabled ancestor of the modern civil rights movement.

Harriet Tubman is one of America's earliest Black female activists, and while she is well known in Black American culture, not everyone knows her name today. However, while it is common knowledge that Harriet was a staunch abolitionist, it is less known that she was disabled. The traumatic brain injury she received while enslaved resulted in epilepsy. Incredibly, she created such an impact on the abolitionist movement when she was living. Medical professionals of the time did not understand epilepsy. She created freedom for others, even as she was unaccommodated. She was simultaneously illiterate. She freed herself, and approximately *seventy* others, while navigating epileptic seizures, hypersomnia, and a lifetime of chronic pain. She kept fighting for equality till she died, acting as an intelligence agent for the Union in

the Civil War, and later still creating progress towards the success of the women's suffrage movement. Her illustrious life ended with the creation of a care home for elderly Black people and Black people with disabilities (Hobson, 2019).

In the present day, Black disabled collectives and abolitionist organizations conduct Harriet's legacy. These include but are not limited to, the Harriet Tubman Collective, the Abolition and Disability Justice Coalition, Disability Justice Collective, and more. She saved countless generations from the traumas of enslavement and oppression, just by her strength and determination. She was a true example of the impact possible, regardless of the severity of individual marginalization. She is a reminder of the necessity of community care and social nets, and the influence they have on survival. It is to be hoped that her place as a disabled ancestor of the modern civil rights movement will be acknowledged.

Marsha P. Johnson is one of the most well-known activists of the LGBTQ+/queer rights movement. She is known for being the Black trans woman who helped fight back against the homophobic, transphobic oppression of police at the Stonewall riots in New York, NY, and for marching in the first Pride, but her life with disability and the resulting influence on her work is not as frequently acknowledged, unless you know where to look (Cohen, 2007). Even as she was protesting the loss of community members to oppression, she was also dealing with intense medical abuse and procedures done without her consent, as well as incarceration (Tourmaline et al., 2006). Her organizations were additionally impacted by the local police (Karoutsos, 2022). Despite these repeating traumas, she organized with Sylvia Rivera and other disabled trans women to advocate for trans people and sex workers, and supplied food, clothing, and family support to uncountable trans and nonbinary youths and adults (Feinberg & Rivera, 1998).

In the present day, Black Queer Disabled activists continue Marsha P. Johnson's legacy worldwide (Tourmaline, 2019). It is unfortunate that her early death at the hands of an unknown villain is a fear that Black trans people still face at the intersection of race and gender. Despite this, her story has resulted in the visibility of the Black trans led organizations following her example in the present day. An example of an organization with an immense impact is the Marsha P. Johnson Institute which redistributed over $454k to Black trans people in need (Marsha P. Johnson Institute, 2019). Pride is now a yearly global celebration, and people are continuously creating more support and protections for the LGBTQ+ community. Her focus on supporting those most marginalized is still notable today, and mutual aid networks for the LGBTQ+ community thrive, with one of the biggest groups in need being Black trans people (Vaden, 2022). Marsha helped create space for Black trans people to be seen and supported in a world that is not always kind. It is to be hoped that she will be accurately represented in her place as a queer disabled ancestor of the modern civil rights movement.

Why identity matters

Society now shies away from identity politics, but this does not negate the societal marginalization of these individuals (Crenshaw, 2016). Oppressed by both systemic ableism and racism, Tubman, Lomax, and Johnson experienced a stark historical erasure of their disability in spite of the role disability plays in the impact they made. Despite these broad commonalities of unjust experiences, considered by others to be insurmountable barriers, they all contributed immensely to the freedoms and civil rights we have today. They are only three people, yet each created enormous ripples that resulted in a better life for all of us, of any race, ability, or gender. This brings to mind the question: where are the disabled activists for the CRT movement? Considering their deep historical impact on us all, why aren't they acknowledged beyond CRT academia? When we leave disability out of the conversation around information sciences, so much context is hidden from analysis due to inaccurate assessment. Ableism negatively affects all people, and this impact multiplies against Black disabled people. We cannot even discuss deafness without recognizing the reasons behind the racial reasons why half of Black deaf adults did not know there was an entire community resulting from the development of Black American sign language (Dunn & Anderson, 2019). What if social nets and support for Black disabled people of all ages was a reality? What if we had a way to argue that historically Black disabled activists have a necessary viewpoint created from their identity and experiences with marginalization and oppressive behavior? As a result of their unique and complex lived experience, they are often a living indicator of what happens when a society does not support those most marginalized.

We cannot accurately apply the lens of CRT to LIS without an understanding of the real-world implications of intersectionality. Thoughtful cataloging and the creation of finding aids for research and discovery can only do so much when there is still a vast amount of people who are unable to be outspoken about their intersectional marginalization. It is deeply necessary that we make the information sciences a place where Black disabled people can thrive, whether as community members or staff (Bethel, 1994). How can we create more opportunities for equitable representation and understanding of marginalized disabled groups in literature, cataloging, historical record, and more in LIS as a field? How will we provide complete research resources on these topics and perspectives? There will be a need for this research to facilitate accurate cataloging of this innate societal diversity. It makes a positive societal impact when information and education disciplines and sectors are provided with a more complete understanding of their most marginalized groups.

The oppression in our society creates a default silencing of these activists who speak on these issues, whether it is lack of platform, support, access to information, or just lack of care. We should override this cultural conditioning of exclusion, as currently aided by the implicit and explicit biases of this field. Through the example set by Black disabled activists now and in the past, we learn mutual aid, community care, a deeper understanding of civil rights, and yes, critical race theory. When we

listen, we get the history behind finding the answers to questions like, why are Black disabled people nearly half of all Black deaths at the hands of police? Why do we never hear about the ways systemic ableism and racism coincide to result in tragic outcomes? Organizations call out for more awareness around people living in the intersections (Harriet Tubman Collective, 2020). Where are all the Black disabled activists? And more so, where are all the Black disabled librarians and information professionals? What could they do, with accommodations, without the limitations placed by society? The best-case scenarios have them overeducated and underemployed, and additionally, under accommodated and underrepresented! What if we did not wait for Black disabled people to be exceptional before we acknowledge them? As information professionals with the skills to find the information we need in any given database, we should be bold enough to discover who is not present in our libraries and why. How would we help Brad Lomax, Harriet Tubman, and Marsha P. Johnson if they were patrons today? We must elevate our Black disabled community members as they are, listening to their circumstances, their experiences, their support, their needs, and their voices, because as we uplift the most marginalized among us, we all rise.

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