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Danielle C. Biss

San Diego State University, dbiss3342@sdsu.edu

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Cover Page Footnote

Danielle C. Biss is a master’s candidate in the School of Communication at San Diego State University. The author would like to thank Dr. Tiffany A. Dykstra-DeVette, Anna Wilcoxon, Megan Cullinan, Kourtney Maison for their helpful suggestions and assistance throughout the revision process, Dr. Michelle Holling for her guidance in COMM 405 Feminist Rhetoric, where an earlier version of this article derived, and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions and feedback.

Getting “Woke” on Intersectionality: Illuminating the Rhetorical Significance of Disability Discourse in Feminist Activist Spaces

Danielle C. Biss

In the 28 years since the establishment of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), individuals with disabilities still live on the margins in social, public, and mediated discourse. Women of color with disabilities, in particular, still struggle to challenge their positionality on the margins due to multifaceted layers of oppression, ranging from sexism, racism, classism, and ableism as further complexities of identity. Yet, in a society with such disregard for and contestation involving disability issues, there is hope with disability activist Vilissa Thompson. In this rhetorical analysis, I examine Thompson as a marginal rhetor whose disability activism serves as a form of public pedagogy to inform the public how to engage in disability discourse in feminist activist spaces. Examined is Thompson’s hashtag #DisabilityTooWhite and her development of the website Ramp Your Voice as a discursive mediated platform of empowerment for people of color with disabilities. Applications for applying intersectional theory in praxis are discussed.

Keywords: disability rhetoric, whiteness, white fragility, intersectionality, public pedagogy

In the 28 years since the establishment of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), individuals with disabilities still live on the margins in social, public, and mediated discourse. They are restricted to forms of self-advocacy for equitable opportunities in accessibility, education, and job opportunities (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017). Legislation (i.e., ADA) may protect people with disabilities from workplace discrimination and inaccessibility; however, no form of law can alter perceptions that able-bodied individuals possess regarding the capabilities of people with disabilities. Women with disabilities, in particular, still struggle to challenge their positionality on the margins due to multifaceted layers of oppression, ranging from sexism, racism, classism, and ableism. (Dolmage & Lewiecki-Wilson, 2010; Freedman, 2007; Hirschmann, 2013; National Disability Institute, 2017).

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Ramifications continue in mediated and public discourses, illuminating the prevalent monolith of whiteness in *both* the feminist and disability movements. Feminism(s) became more nuanced after the First and Second Waves to be inclusive of experiences of women of color and Lesbian women (Cruger, 2008; Hill Collins, 1991, 2016; Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016; hooks, 1984; Lorde, 1984). Yet, the disability movement historically and contemporarily faces challenges with centering whiteness instead of addressing the varied experiences of people with disabilities (Bell, 2010; Brown, 2016; Hewitt, 2014; Zames Fleischer & Zames, 2011). Disability activists have critiqued the continual representation of (White) able-bodied actors portraying characters with disabilities in mediated discourses (Hewitt, 2014). This trend creates an environment in which people of color with disabilities are restricted political and social agency and thus have access to fewer opportunities to share and/or see their experiences represented in popular culture.

Such a monolithic representation is highly problematic as people with disabilities make up the largest minority group in the United States. People of color with disabilities, specifically, make up the largest percentage of the disability community (National Disability Institute, 2017; Nuru-Jeter, Thorpe, & Fuller-Thompson, 2011). African Americans with disabilities face even further socioeconomic barriers, as 40 percent live in poverty compared to their White counterparts at 24 percent. Historically, marginalized bodies have been (and remain) forced to advocate for themselves against hegemonic structures designed with their exclusion in mind, such as women, people of color, people with disabilities, LGBTQIA folks, to name a few.

Yet, in a society with such lack of regard for and contention involving disability issues, there is hope with Vilissa Thompson. Thompson is a Licensed Master Social Worker, disability rights consultant, writer, and advocate whose work is featured in the *HuffPost*, *NY Times*, *Buzzfeed*, *Bitch Media*, *Upworthy*, *Black Girl Needs*, and *The Atlantic*, among others (Melancon, 2017; Thompson, 2016a, 2016b, 2017). Amongst many popular disability advocates, Thompson is unique due to how she centers her activism on addressing and educating the public and political figures about the plight of people with disabilities, in particular women of color with disabilities (Ramp Your Voice!, 2019).

In this research, I prefer people first language (i.e. person with a disability) when communicating about disability and doing so is a strategic choice; first, to respect a person's identity as a human subject and second, acknowledge their disability as a component of identity, but not disregard their capabilities as a human subject or sense of agency. However, many scholars in feminist disability studies, communication studies, disability activists such as Vilissa Thompson, and people with disabilities prefer disability first-language (e.g., disabled person) to signify disability as a core component to a person's identity. Because of this, I try to be mindful of folks

who identify using identity-first language and alter my semiotics per their preference throughout this research. With linguistic practices in mind, forms of public pedagogy help us understand more fully how to engage in mindful discourses (Cruger, 2018; Frey & Palmer, 2014). Thus, in this research, I turn to Vilissa Thompson who illuminates ways to engage in intersectional disability discourse through her disability activism.

This paper contributes to feminist disability studies and communication studies by demonstrating how prior scholarship on disability activism fails to address the experiences of people of color with disabilities. By establishing how White feminism underpins disability studies, I contend that (White) feminist disability research harms communication studies as a field by continuing to place the experiences of people of color with disabilities under erasure. Existing scholarship on race and disability studies is limited and continually explores experiences of disability through a lens of whiteness (Bell, 2010). Unpacking the multiple processes of oppression for women of color with disabilities opens up new avenues for research and produces much greater insight (Dolmage & Lewiecki-Wilson, 2010). The research question guiding this rhetorical analysis is: *How does the rhetoric in Vilissa Thompson's public pedagogy open up spaces of intersectional disability discourse in feminist activist spaces?* Ultimately, I argue that as a rhetorical strategy, Thompson centers the margins using intersectionality as a pedagogical tool, allowing her to instruct the public on how they should advocate for, and rhetorically situate, people of color with disabilities.

I do this by first providing a review of the literature on disability activism and feminism(s) to give the reader context of the marginality people of color with disabilities face and the restricted disability discourse in feminist activist spaces. Second, I contextualize Vilissa Thompson's feminist disability activism. Third, in my analysis, I provide insight to two particular instances of Thompson's feminist rhetoric in practice: (1) her initiation of the #DisabilityTooWhite hashtag on Twitter and (2) creation of the website *Ramp Your Voice* as a mediated space for inclusion for people of color with disabilities. Finally, I convey the rhetorical significance of disability discourse and implications for centering the margins in public pedagogy.

Literature Review

Disability as stigma implicates a multitude of interconnected facets of life. People with disabilities experience oppressions due to their disability in conjunction with their race and/or ethnicity, gender, class, sexual orientation, age, and/or citizenship status; yet, there is little research illuminating forms of public pedagogy that inform the public how to mindfully engage in disability discourse and integrate intersectionality in feminist activist spaces (Asch, 2004; Cruger, 2018; Dolmage & Lewiecki-Wilson, 2010; Garland-Thompson, 1997, 2011; Lloyd, 2001; Shriempf, 2001). With the objective of participating in the ongoing conversations around engaging in

more intersectional approaches to disability studies, this research seeks to contribute by looking at the particular intersections of race and disability. This literature review begins by contextualizing how disability is a feminist issue. Second, I historicize ableism and neglect of women (of color) with disabilities in feminism(s)

Disability is a Feminist Issue

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2017), one in five American women live with some type of disability. Women with disabilities are one of the largest and most disadvantaged populations in the United States (Palombi, 2013). The intersecting nature of gender, age, time of onset of disability, type of impairment, social class, citizenship status, education, race and/or ethnicity, and sexuality may contribute to alienation, isolation, and marginalization for women with disabilities (Blahovec, 2016; Freedman, 2006; Palombi, 2013; Smith, 2009).

Women with disabilities are twice as likely to be victims of sexual assault and violence, twice as likely to experience poverty and unemployment, and more severely affected by the wage gap compared to their able-bodied counterparts (Smith, 2009). Additionally, women with disabilities may be potential victims of sexual assault, yet women's shelters, sexual assault hotlines, and abuse counseling programs may not be set up to meet their needs because of a lack of a disability centered approach or support resources available for clients with disabilities (Ewing, 2002). Oftentimes, women with disabilities face structural barriers and policy restrictions in receiving access to services due to potential speech impediments, lack of interpersonal communication skills, dependency on and compliance to neurotypical society, lack of sex education, and other factors that diminish their agency and ability to share their experiences as a survivor of sexual trauma (Barger, Wacker, Macy, & Parish, 2009; Shapiro, 2018).

Despite the notorious neglect of disability from feminist movements(s) and activism, numerous scholars find feminism(s) and feminist perspectives useful in analyzing and understanding disability (Asch & Fine, 1997; Garland-Thompson, 1997, 2011; Hillyer, 1993; O'Toole, 2004; Wendell, 1997; Wilkeson, 2011). Garland-Thompson (2011) asserts, "disability—like gender—is a concept that pervades all aspects of culture: its structuring institutions, social identities, cultural practices, political positions, historical communities, and the shared human experience of embodiment" (p. 15). Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality allows for disability to be understood as an axis of oppression that impacts a person with a disability's experiences in the social world. Additionally, intersectionality provides a tool to recognize formerly silenced experiences that become illuminated in one's positionality (e.g., as a person of color with a disability). Understanding disability cannot be addressed through a mono-issue approach since systems of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality,

and class mutually construct, inflict, and contradict one another (Dolmage & Lewiecki-Wilson, 2010); moreover, disability can never be understood absent other intersecting identities.

Historicizing Ableism and Neglect of Women (of Color) with Disabilities in Feminism(s)

Throughout each wave of feminism(s) and feminist activism, the experience of disability has remained suppressed (Lamp & Cleigh, 2011). First wave feminism, which began in the 19th century though 1920, focused on suffrage and a political agenda around sexual, reproductive rights, and economic matters (Freedman, 2006). In this era, women with disabilities were often not included and/or advocated for by the able-bodied (White) feminist majority (Butler, 1993; Foss, Foss, & Griffin, 2008; Morris, 1993). As the feminist movement transitioned to the Second Wave, bodily autonomy for women with disabilities continued to be contested throughout abortion discourses. Providing provocative insight, Garland Thompson (1993) conveys, “feminist abortion rationale seldom questions the ‘defective’ fetuses destined to become disabled people” (p. 286). As such, the lack of disability discourse within reproductive justice contributes to the hegemonic maintenance of ableism (Garland-Thompson, 1997; Hubbard, 1997; Lloyd, 2001).

Despite its ongoing complexities, progress was made to dismantle whiteness as the center of feminism(s). Specifically, women of color began to challenge the leadership of White women’s lack of recognition of race-related issues (Freedman, 2007). For example, Womanism emerged during the second wave of feminism as a response to Black women’s exclusion in feminist discourses, identifying a womanist as a “black feminist or feminist of color... [who] appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility, and women’s strength... [and is] committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female” (Walker, 1983, p. xi). Yet, little discourse in feminist activist spaces developed to center the experiences of women of color with disabilities. Such a lack of voice makes it difficult for able-bodied feminists to understand experiences from disability. The voices of feminists with disabilities remain suppressed due to feminist perspectives reflecting those in power (i.e., an able-bodied white majority) at both structural and community levels. The experiences women of color with disabilities illuminates intersectional complexities of disability. Neglecting to advocate the experiences of both feminists with and without disabilities commits an injustice to the rich diversity of feminists.

Disability continued to be disregarded as an axis of oppression in feminist advocacy throughout the Second and Third waves. Some feminist disability scholars have highlighted this by examining the use of ableist metaphors in feminist vernacular discourse (Hirschmann, 2013; Lamp & Cleigh, 2011; May & Ferri, 2005; Schalk, 2013). Although a variety of theories and

practices in feminism(s) work toward social justice, the propagation of ableist language within feminism(s) highlighting areas where work must still be done within the movement in order for it to fully achieve its goals. Women with disabilities are perceived to be passive agents with restricted social, sexual, and political agency (Asch, 2004; Boswell, 2001; Lamp & Cleigh, 2011; Morris, 1993; O'Toole, 2004; Wilkeson, 2011). Women with disabilities have been objects of selective abortion, eugenic programs, hate crimes, mercy killing, and further discriminatory practices (Garland-Thompson, 2011). Thus, understanding how disability functions along with other systems of representation (e.g., race, gender, and class) illuminates the importance of disability discourses in feminist practices to better understand how systemic forms of oppression intersect and mutually constitute one another. Looking at the public pedagogy of Vilissa Thompson provides provocative insight into disability discourse in feminist activist spaces.

Orienting Thompson's Public Pedagogy as Feminist Rhetoric

In order to construct a critique of Vilissa Thompson's public pedagogy, I utilize a critical feminist disability lens. This particular lens allows us to recognize the rhetorical significance of Thompson's activism: one that informs the public how to engage in disability discourse in feminist activist spaces. In what follows, I first discuss rhetorical criticism before then contextualizing Thompson's disability activism in order to better understand how this lens operates to convey Thompson's public pedagogy as feminist rhetoric.

What is a Critical Feminist Disability Lens

Critical rhetoric functions as a form of critique, one particularly committed to investigating a rhetor's *telos* — purpose, goal, and/or end state (McKerrow & St. John, 2009). In the context of her activism, Thompson's *telos* can be understood as her commitment to centering the margins of disability discourses in public pedagogy, which is disseminated through the #DisabilityTooWhite hashtag and website *Ramp Your Voice*. Thompson seeks to actively effect change in her environment through her use of intersectionality as a pedagogical tool. In my analysis, I illustrate the rhetorical significance of Thompson's public pedagogy strategies that demonstrate ways to engage in discursive tactics of disability discourses in feminist activist spaces to a broader public.

Moreover, with a goal of decentering whiteness and deconstructing hegemonic structures in disability discourse, a critical feminist disability lens specifically helps us understand the discursive regimes that facilitate the maintenance of hegemonic power structures in feminist activist spaces. As McKerrow and St. John (2009) maintain, "what critical rhetoric does is examine the impact of particular discursive formations on the lived conditions of a people, and at the same time raises the question of social change" (p. 327).

In addition, feminist rhetorical analysis illuminates the ways symbols function in the social world to signify feminist ideals (Foss et al., 2006). Feminist perspectives in rhetorical studies fall into three broad categories: studies of female orators, studies of social movements about or of concern to women, and subject matters that affect or are particularly significant to women (Foss et al., 2006). Because Thompson's public pedagogy engages in all of these areas, feminist rhetorical analysis is particularly fitting. Thus, utilizing a critical feminist disability rhetoric orientation to Thompson's public pedagogy provides us the appropriate lens to investigate the discursive regimes of disability that (de)construct hegemonic disability discourse in feminist activist spaces. Ultimately, doing so helps us more completely understand how centering marginal identities promotes new insights.

Contextualizing Vilissa Thompson's Disability Activism

Vilissa Thompson is a Black hard of hearing little woman with osteogenesis imperfecta, also known as brittle bone disease (Ramp Your Voice!, 2017). She identifies as a "boldly disabled" and "unapologetically and personally Black" (Disability Intersectionality Summit, 2017) womanist, which is important to consider as both the feminist movement(s) and disability movement historically neglected women of color with disabilities (McCrafer, 2015). Demonstrating many qualities associated with third wave feminism Thompson's activism is consciously intersectional; focusing her feminist activism on ending oppression for people with disabilities, particularly women of color with disabilities.

As a social worker, Thompson became interested in disability advocacy due to the lack of women of color with disabilities represented in the disability community, mass media representations, and public discourse (Brown, 2016). Thompson shares:

When I look in the mirror, I see Black first, then a woman, and lastly disability. When I go out in the world, they see a Black woman in a wheelchair and make assumptions about my humanness and abilities without knowing my name. Being a [sic] multiply and visibly marginalized [person] has shaped me in ways that I did not realize until I became an advocate. The erasure and invisibility of Black disabled people, and Black disabled women specifically, led me to this work – why wouldn't I prioritize us in my activism? (Melancon, 2017, para. 9)

Importantly, her lived experiences as a disabled Black woman signify her positionality as a marginal rhetor¹ in the social world. In addition, her

1 Marginal rhetors are "those who produce counterhegemonic discourse from positions of marginality" (Foss et al., 2006, p. 93). As a Black disabled woman, Thompson's positionality signifies unique insight that derive from her lived experiences on the margins.

positionality and forms of public pedagogy help us understand the ways she urges the public to “get woke” on intersectionality. Her forms of disability activism serve as exemplars of public pedagogy and help inform the public on how to engage in mindful disability discourse. As Thompson’s activism focuses on women of color with disabilities, she joins an ongoing theoretical conversation championing Crenshaw’s (1989) notion of intersectionality. Thompson’s activism illuminates disability discourse through Hill Collins’ (1991) matrix of domination, which views the relations of domination for Black women with disabilities as structured via a system of interlocking race, class, gender, and disability oppression, which Hill Collins suggests expands the focus of analysis from simply describing the similarities and differences distinguishing these systems of oppression to focus greater attention on how they are *interconnected* forms of oppression.

By centering her disability activism on women of color with disabilities, Thompson “opens up possibilities for a both/and conceptual stance” (Hill Collins, 1991, p. 225) as a Black woman with a disability. Each form of oppression women of color with disabilities endure reinforces and complicates the simultaneity of facets of oppression that manifest in Hill Collins’ matrix of domination. Thompson’s disability activism is unique due to her focus on centering her positionality as a Black disabled woman. In doing so, she illuminates intersectionality as a tool that complicates public perceptions of experiences for women of color with disabilities and illuminates the discursive regimes that manifest in white privilege. To help us more clearly understand ways of engaging in disability discourse and intersectionality, I examine two examples of Thompson’s public pedagogy as forms of feminist rhetoric.

Feminist Rhetoric in Thompson’s Public Pedagogy

Thompson’s use of public pedagogy helps the public understand how to link feminist theories (specifically intersectionality) with everyday discourses and practices, illustrating the possibility for and potential of more mindful and inclusive discourse and activism. In what follows, I provide two examples of Thompson’s public pedagogy; (1) her implementation #DisabilityTooWhite hashtag and (2) the creation of the website *Ramp Your Voice*.

Centering the Margins: #DisabilityTooWhite Igniting While Fragility and Dialogue

In May 2016, after reading an *Xo Jane* article entitled “Don’t Believe the Media’s Lies: Disability and Beauty Are Not Mutually Exclusive,” (2016), Thompson was frustrated that the only women with disabilities discussed were White. As a response to the article, she originated #DisabilityTooWhite to extend dialogue about mediated representations of disability and beauty only featuring White people. On May 18, 2016, VilissaThompson (2016) utilized the hashtag #DisabilityTooWhite to respond to the article, writing:

“#DisabilityTooWhite I need to see Black, Brown, Yellow, & Red disabled faces to feel validated.” Jaya Saxena, a writer for the *Daily Dot*, interviewed Thompson about her rationale for the hashtag in which Thompson shares, “being a woman of color, I never see us being considered ‘beautiful’ or having our stories widely shared in the mass media. That story lit something within me, and the hashtag, #DisabilityTooWhite, popped in my head and was born” (Saxena, 2016, para. 5). The hashtag went viral within a month and sparked dialogue between people with and without disabilities. Two particular themes emerge that demonstrate the rhetoricity of Thompson’s public pedagogy: (1) centering whiteness and white fragility and (2) cultural critique.

(De)Centering Whiteness and White Fragility. The hashtag illuminated ideological underpinnings of whiteness in both disability representations and public perceptions of disability, which I argue is a form of public pedagogy that provides a context for the public to learn how to engage mindfully in disability discourse. Thompson’s hashtag is a discursive formation that illuminates how disability in media representations affirm hegemonic maintenance and discursively constructed understandings of whiteness and disability as synonymous. In other words, the hashtag unpacks the ways societal structures normalize disability and whiteness as one and the same. With the hashtag, people of color with disabilities began to use Twitter to express their emotions regarding lived experiences and the continual perpetuation of whiteness in media representations, popular culture, and public discourse. Within one week, there were 49 retweets of the original tweet amongst thousands of other tweets using the hashtag to create an exchange of dialogue.

Twitter users utilized the hashtag to decenter whiteness by sharing moments of their lived experiences to illustrate structural oppressions stemming from the intersections of their disability, gender, race, and class. Twitter user nealcarter (2016) shares, “#DisabilityTooWhite when it’s assumed that black parents of disabled kids can’t raise them.” Tweets like this help the public begin to rhetorically situate people of color with disabilities, and their parents, as agents capable of advocating for themselves and the necessary accommodations to live in an ableist society.

Others used Twitter to illustrate the structural oppression that people of color with disabilities face, such as phinneasfrogg (2016) who tweets, “#DisabilityTooWhite when black autistic people go underdiagnosed and labelled as ‘behaviour problems,’” or user Meghan_Hussey (2016) who shares: “#DisabilityTooWhite when people still think ‘#autism is a white people thing’ and black children go undiagnosed.” Twitter user neurowonderful (2016) also comments, “#DisabilityTooWhite My school tried to make me choose between being in SpEd and Native Program in Gr12. Both were ‘too much’. But I am both.” These tweets signify some of the traumatic experiences that people of color with disabilities endure during their upbringing. Considering intersectionality as a pedagogical tool,

the #DisabilityTooWhite hashtag allowed Twitter users to illuminate their intersectional experiences of being both a disabled person and a person of color.

The hashtag also served as a platform for discursive struggles that reify and challenge the hegemonic maintenance of what Robin DiAngelo (2011) coined as white fragility for White people with and without disabilities. DiAngelo (2011) defines white fragility as a:

State in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. These behaviors, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium. (p. 57)

When White people engage in conversations that question their white privilege, they often become uncomfortable and engage in such behaviors.

White Twitter users illustrated white fragility in their responses to people of color with disabilities engaging with the #DisabilityTooWhite hashtag. For example, user DatNoFact (2016) writes, “Good morning, World! How can we hate white people today? I know. Let’s turn disability into a race issue! #DisabilityTooWhite”. Other Twitter users struggled to understand how their whiteness functions as a form of privilege, regardless of other marginalizing facets of identity. User MsShannonGibbs (2016), shares, “What privilege do I have being white? I didn’t choose that anymore than I chose being wheelchair bound #DisabilityTooWhite @VilissaThompson.” As illustrated in the prior tweets, it is often difficult for White people to recognize that they even have a race and when they do they become defensive while communicating about their white privilege (Moon, 2016).

Other Twitter users took out their frustrations while grappling with the complexities of whiteness, such as georgia_llg (2016), who shares, “@#DisabilityTooWhite is the most retar- sorry, mentally challenged hashtag yet.” Witnessing the hashtag spread, Thompson also recognized the backlash, such as from Twitter user BB2448885 (2016) who shares, “Never been embarrassed to be in a wheelchair until tonight. Nice job, Twitter. #DisabilityTooWhite.” In a tweet addressing backlash, VilissaThompson (2016) responds by writing, “For the trolls on the #DisabilityTooWhite hashtag. You are the reason the hashtag exists. #BrutalTruth.” She includes a meme of a young Black woman saying, “Nobody cares about your white feelings.”

Such tweets reflecting white fragility deconstruct hegemonic ideals that rhetorically situate whiteness as a normative societal construct. From a digital platform, the tweets highlight how white privilege oftentimes goes unnoticed by White people, and when addressed by people of color, White people face tension. Other White twitter users reflected white ignorance, such as from user

whitefaerie (2016) who suggests, “It is just a coincidence that the public face of disability is mostly white?”, user HereForThePones (2016), “Did twitter really just turn disability into a race issue with #disabilitytoowhite? How pathetic.”, or user ViktoriaCsendes (2016) saying, “#DisabilityTooWhite Is this about POC being angry that you can get free parking with the disability card but not with the race card?” Such moments of tensions help us greater understand how members of the public rhetorically situate whiteness as the societal ideal for a person with a disability and illustrate pragmatically how white fragility functions in digital mediated spaces. Not only did the tweets serve as a moment to engage in dialogue about whiteness and white privilege, they also created opportunities for people of color to reflect on structural forms of oppression.

Cultural Critique. The hashtag also served as the impetus to engage in a cultural critique of whiteness in media representations of disability. Oftentimes, disability is portrayed in mass media with the stereotypical White male. For example, Kody_Keplinger (2016) writes on Twitter, “Our community is diverse, and we need to acknowledge that. Our media needs to reflect that. #Intersectionality #DisabilityTooWhite”. Additionally, IsaJennie (2016) shares, “#DisabilityTooWhite when people think Disabled = white... that’s a problem. White Disabled people need to pass the mic.” The hashtag #DisabilityTooWhite served as the impetus to engage in much-needed dialogue about the ways in which disability and whiteness are perceived as synonymous.

Dialogue is a critical part of changing how the public engages in disability discourses in feminist activist spaces. As Foss et al. (2006) maintain, “engaging with those in privileged positions opens up spaces for greater understanding of the structures of domination and how they function” (p. 88). By engaging in dialogue, White people can examine the ways they communicate their own racism, whiteness, and participation in various forms of oppression. The dialogue that emerged from #DisabilityTooWhite allows members of the public to become accustomed to centering those at margins. Specifically, doing so “invites us to remain attuned to our positionalities, to be self-reflexive, and to pursue questions about whose voices we hear (*and fail to hear*) in the [communication] discipline and in society” (Holling, 2018, p. 534). Thompson thus serves as an exemplar, utilizing her positionality as a pedagogical tool that allows others to understand how her lived experiences as a disabled Black woman are suppressed and encourages the public to become more mindful of erasure in disability discourses of the voices of people of color.

As a rhetor, Thompson utilizes a feminist rhetorical strategy of honoring multiplicity through the hashtag as a way to disrupt hegemonic thought (Foss et al., 2006). Through this strategy, Thompson is able to “maintain a deliberate openness to multiple meanings and acknowledge—and in fact, feature—the complexity of perspectives inherent in representing and describing any phenomenon” (Foss et al., 2006, p. 244). Thompson’s

hashtag functions rhetorically as a symbol that provokes visceral reactions. As readers on Twitter engage with the hashtag, their interpretations illustrate their understandings of whiteness and disability. Through Twitter user responses, both self-reflection and defensiveness become prevalent in this movement. People of color are able to highlight their lived experiences on the margins and White people, simultaneously, are able to make sense of their white privilege and engage in a fruitful dialogue with people of color. Thompson's hashtag serves as a form of public pedagogy that helps the public learn how to better engage in disability discourse by being conscious of white privilege and validating the experiences of people of color with disabilities. While Twitter, as a platform, allows for emergent and rapidly evolving dialogue, Thompson's website *Ramp Your Voice* provides further insight into Thompson's rhetorical strategies by providing a more stable and curated space for discourse and public.

Reclaiming Agency: Ramp Your Voice Empowering People of Color with Disabilities

In 2013, Vilissa Thompson created the website *Ramp Your Voice* to feature voices from people of color with disabilities in disability discourse, particularly those from Black women with disabilities (Melancon, 2017). Thompson thought it would be empowering for members of the disability community to see their experiences on a mediated platform. As a result, she chose to develop a website that could combine her educational and life experiences as a disabled Black woman. Moreover, *Ramp Your Voice* operates as a form of public pedagogy since Thompson utilizes her positionality as a strategic tool to center those at the margins in a way that is easily accessible to a broad range of the public. On her website, she posts several blogs that highlight the lived realities of being a person of color, specifically a Black woman, with a disability.

Thompson developed *Ramp Your Voice* came as a way to extend her advocacy work and a way to humanize the disabled experience, stating, "humanizing us [people of color with disabilities] weakens the misconceptions, prejudices, and biases about who we are. When you read my writings, I want you to come away knowing how a disabled person lives and thinks and to remove inaccuracies about our values and worth" (Melancon, 2017, para. 9). By focusing on the marginalized experience living as a Black disabled woman, Thompson helps the public learn from the ways she navigates the social world. She discussed many social issues on her blog, with over 20 categories for her posts including Black disabled and proud, disability and accessibility, legality and disability, disabled characters, parenting with disability, and the disabled experience.

Thompson's website engages with the rhetorical strategy of confession, allowing her to utilize her positionality and lived experiences to rupture social discourses. This rhetorical strategy emphasizes the "telling of one's

personal experience, speaking the truth of one's life, or giving testimony, and it constitutes another means by which theory can be disseminated" (Foss et al., 2006, p. 86). Through confession, Thompson as a rhetor names and gives voice to her experience by "sharing my anger, pains, and joys in embracing being a woman who is Black, physically disabled, a wheelchair user, a little woman, and hard of hearing and finding space and community in the process were unexpected occurrences that strengthened my presence and advocacy" (Melancon, 2017, para. 10). Thompson's use of confession surrounding her lived experiences as a marginal rhetor can expand ableist minds by connecting her personal experience and a broader political agenda (e.g., deconstructing ableism).

On *Ramp Your Voice's* blog post entitled "Why Black Disability History Matters," Thompson describes how she and other people of color with disabilities grow up feeling as if Black disabled people are overlooked (Thompson, 2017). In her introduction, she writes, "What struck me was the anger some felt about not knowing Black disabled figures and their accomplishments; the erasure showed me that it was not just Black disabled folks like myself who needed to read these pieces. Recognizing our place in history DO [sic] matter" (Thompson, 2018, para. 2). Following her introduction, she encourages other Black people with disabilities to explain why Black disability history matters during Black History Month (Thompson, 2018). Loryn Wilson Carter, a digital strategist and writer, was published on the blog championing how:

Black disabled people deserve to be seen and they deserve to be included as part of our rich history. Not including us is to deny our very existence and deny our worth and our accomplishments. And also, it implies that Black people cannot be also disabled which is patently false. Celebrating all kinds of Blackness and Black excellence MUST include Black disabled people. (Thompson, 2018, para. 8)

Video gamer Andre Daughtry's statement resonates with Thompson, as it encourages us again to recognize intersectionality as a pedagogical tool:

Black Disability History [BDH] matters because I'm not Black by/or disabled, I'm Black and disabled all day, every day. I know next to nothing about BDH within the larger context of BHM and that to me is rather shameful, having part of my experience and existence swept under the run. (Thompson, 2018, para 18).

Furthermore, the responses rhetorically situate Thompson's position as a marginal rhetor utilizing intersectionality as a pedagogical tool to integrate heterogeneous voices that represent diverse people of color with disabilities. Ultimately, this integration advances Holling's (2018) call to pursue social justice work that centralizes those on the margins and marginalizes the center.

In other examples of her advocacy efforts on *Ramp Your Voice*, Thompson continues to center the experiences of Black women with disabilities by developing the “Black Disabled Women Syllabus,” a pedagogical tool to inform readers on what it means to be Black and disabled in the world (Thompson, 2016a). The syllabus consists of 164 writings, books, and artistic works that center the experiences of Black women with disabilities. Yet, despite compiling the tools to inform the public on the lived experiences of living as a Black woman with a disability, she maintains, “when a white person ‘demands’ to know why I do what I do, I have something to give them. I can proclaim: I compiled the knowledge – take it upon yourself to educate yourselves” (Melancon, 2017, para. 11).

The syllabus covers a range of topics including Black feminism/womanism; the Black disabled body and identity; articles about Blackness, feminism, and/or disability; books about Blackness in America; fiction and poetic works; audio/video; and music. Thompson’s Black Disabled Woman’s Syllabus utilizes public pedagogy to disseminate intersectionality theory. She encourages the public to consult the syllabus as a way to learn from disabled women of color about their lived experiences, rather than expecting those in our lives to engage in the emotional labor of sharing their lived experiences as a way to educate us. As readers click a link to learn of the lived experiences of Black disabled women, the articles serve as mediated sites of discursive transformation. Specifically, as Foss et al., (2006) suggest, “education at all levels has the potential to be a site where individuals can unlearn the ideology of domination and where critical thinking can take place in service of decolonization” (p. 91). Furthermore, as a form of public pedagogy, *Ramp Your Voice* helps the public achieve greater understanding about how to engage in disability discourses that integrate theories of intersectionality in feminist activist spaces.

Theoretical Implications and Practical Insights

By challenging the inherent whiteness within the disability community and media representation as an engaged disability activist, Thompson provides counter-discourses of disability through her forms of public pedagogy. In this paper, by examining two timely exemplars of Thompson’s activism, I illuminated the rhetorical significance of intersectionality as a pedagogical tool in feminist rhetoric. Thompson possesses insights others do not because of the dual vision afforded by her marginal status. Her ethos is not determined by the degree to which she exhibits intelligence, moral character, and goodwill, but rather by the insights she is able to offer that derive from her personal experiences from her positionality as a Black disabled woman.

By addressing the lack of reflexivity in feminist activist spaces engaging in intersectional disability discourses, I established how disability studies fails to examine issues of race and ethnicity as intersections of the lives of diverse people with disabilities. Importantly, this paper advances further how rhetors

like Thompson need to be given scholarly attention to extend engagement in discourses that counter hegemonic ideals such as disability and whiteness (Bell, 2010). In the field of communication studies, intersectionality has garnered a multitude of opportunities for those on the margins to (re)claim their narratives and (re)affirm their self-proclaimed agency. Intersectional feminist disability activism is another opportunity to de-center whiteness in disability advocacy and encourage White disability advocates to be reflexive about their positionality. As Tarana Burke (2017) suggests, “what history has shown us time and again is that if marginalized voices — those of people of color, queer people, disabled people, and poor people — aren’t centered in our movements then they tend to become no more than a footnote” (para. 11). As explored in this research, the lived experiences of disability are not exclusive to any sole race, class, or gender; yet, as Thompson’s public pedagogy conveys, the response to it often is.

Centering the margins allows rhetors to focus on how multifaceted forms of oppression intersect, conflict, and deny agency to individuals with disabilities. As Vilissa Thompson advocates for women of color with disabilities, she not only challenges the monolith of disability as White, but importantly, challenges what opportunities and perspectives may be perceived as feminist. While I have focused specifically on race as an area of tension within disability studies, there are many more intersections of lived experiences of disability that deserve time and attention. In future pursuits of social justice, highlighting the intersections of disability and other marginal identities will reveal new opportunities for inclusion that further the goals of feminist social transformation.

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