



Storying ableism: proposing a feminist intersectional approach to linking theory and digital activism

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Abstract

By addressing ableism through social media and other digital outlets, feminist disability activists share stories on what it means to be human from an intersectional perspective, and their storying is a way of understanding and theorising the world. However, the possibilities of digital disability activism to story ableism within broader feminist debates are underexplored. Storying as an anti-hegemonic approach to theorising ableism further from an intersectional perspective, implemented through an activist-academic working alliance, contributes to speaking otherwise about disability and draws attention to disability perspectives in feminist theory. In this article, I propose a feminist intersectional approach to storying ableism that exposes manifestations of ableism in its intersections with classism, racism and sexism at structural, identity and representational levels. I then argue for digital disability activism as a means of storying ableism, provide examples of such storying and describe the potentials and principles of digital activist storying. While the creation of further theory is central to the proposed approach, the connection of intersectionality theory with ableism and feminist disability theory serves as its foundation. I discuss how linking ableism with intersectionality strengthens the uncovering of ableism at different levels, why studies of ableism should be extended to fields beyond Disability Studies but remain closely connected to disability activism and how feminist disability theory has thus far shaped debates on the dis/ability binary in relation to the gendered body.

Keywords

Ableism, digital activism, intersectionality, feminism, storying, theory

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Hegemonic theory is often inaccessible, and storying as a way of understanding the world offers an approach to research that aims to enable accessibility to theory. This represents the approach to storying advocated by Louise G. Phillips (a white Australian woman) and Tracey Bunda (a Ngugi / Wakka Wakka Aboriginal woman); for them, storying offers theories on 'what it means to be human' (Phillips and Bunda, 2020: 10). Storying has been central to feminist Disability Studies, for instance in the form of disability life writing (Mintz, 2007; Simplican, 2017)^{1,2} by disabled women, which challenges 'standard ways of conceiving of the body' (Mintz, 2007: 7). Women's narratives of disability and illness disrupt hegemonic notions of normal bodies and their functioning, within and beyond feminist theory. Ableism refers to a system of beliefs, processes and practices that produce and promote a human body standard based on individualised abilities. Ableism is widely accepted and deeply entrenched in many societies built on productivity, competitiveness and consumerism, reinforcing a binary divide between disabled/abled (Wolbring, 2008; Campbell, 2009).^{3,4} I here propose a feminist intersectional approach to storying ableism as a way to create further theory by drawing on digital feminist disability activism. I demonstrate that digital activism is an important source of counter-storytelling that should be recognised for its educational potential, for example through research collaboration with (digital) activists. A feminist intersectional approach to ableism as a research methodology and a theory exposes, and raises awareness on, manifestations of ableism in their intersections with classism, racism and sexism at structural, identity/political and representational levels. Storying ableism can inform policy and practice in a variety of settings, from activism to media representation to the social service system. A storying approach as anti-hegemonic mode of inquiry contributes to 'speaking otherwise' (Campbell, 2008: 154) about disability and ultimately is a way of theorising otherwise. The continuous storying of ableism from activist-theoretical perspectives honours their relevance and draws attention to them within broader feminist debates (Garland-Thomson, 2005).⁵

A feminist intersectional approach to storying ableism

Disability rights activists and Disability Studies scholars have theorised the concept of ableism as a system of classification, de/valorisation and oppression that extensively affects disabled people. Recently, there has been an increase in digital activism claiming to expose ableist practices, as well as in public and political debates about discrimination in which the term ableism is used as a synonym for disablism (Kollodzieyski, 2020).⁶ However, ableism and disablism 'render quite radically different understandings of the status of disability to the norm' (Campbell, 2009: 5). A continuous emphasis on the activist-theoretical origin of the concept of ableism is necessary to avoid its appropriation, while further activism could benefit from making more explicit the shift in perspective that ableism offers (from disability towards notions of the normal as source of oppression) in relation to disablism. I propose a feminist intersectional approach to storying ableism that is based on a transnational activist-academic working alliance aiming to theorise ableism otherwise in ways that both concretise its power effects in the lives of disabled women and move beyond binarisation and a one-dimensional focus on disability

embodiment. Intertwined with dis/ability, processes of abledment – ‘the formation of the “abled person”’ (Campbell, 2019: 153) – and their intersectional complexities are at the core of that project, with a focus on digital activism and different contexts of ableism. I envision a paid cooperation to deepen already existing connections with women feminist disability activists in different countries who address and expose ableism and empower other disabled women through their (digital) activism. In our case, the formal collaboration has not yet begun, which is why this article is not a product of the proposed working alliance but rather provokes possibilities for future research.

Questions to ask through the lens of a feminist intersectional approach to ableism include: How, by/for whom and for what purpose has ableism so far been conceptualised in theory, research and digital activism, in different countries and contexts? How do feminist disability activists from different countries concretise ableism and reconstruct abledment, and how do they address intersections of various forms of power imbalance, privilege and marginalisation in their (digital) activism? What intersectional effects does ableism have on women in relation to the dis/ability binary and beyond a sole focus on (already acquired) disability embodiment, and how can a feminist intersectional approach reveal conditions of abledment in specific contexts? Answers to those questions can be found through a proposed collaboration with feminist disability activists, including conducting a scoping review and building a so-called concept map (Elm and Haupt, 2019)⁷ of ableism in theory, research and digital activism. Such a concept map provides the basis for hybrid (part online and part in-person) collaborative storying of ableism with the objective of further ally/activist public interaction, for instance by creating and presenting digital storyboards and written vignettes of ableism and abledment. Further interaction with additional (disabled) women can take place via online discussion groups with (self-defined) community members of digital disability activists. The aim of these discussion groups is to explore further the power that ableism exerts on (disabled) women and to identify ways in which a feminist intersectional approach to ableism can reveal the conditions of processes of abledment and their intersectionality at structural, identity and representational levels (Winkler and Degele, 2010).⁸ Such a project requires considerable ethical efforts, and questions on epistemology and situatedness in collaborating with activists, especially regarding academic epistemic privilege (Janes, 2016),⁹ data privacy and questions of who profits (most) from this research, must be addressed. To avoid the exploitation of digital disability activists who are self-employed or do not hold (e.g. academic) positions that allow them to put effort into such a project within their day jobs, a paid collaboration is essential. From my own position of academic privilege, I need to be attentive to power asymmetries and, despite emphasising the feminist project and questioning the dis/ability binary, be aware of my standpoint and embodiment in knowledge production. Following Fiona K. Campbell, who addresses the relevance of dis/abled embodiment, I continue to reflect upon how my positionality as a white, able-bodied, cis-female, and thus in certain regards privileged, academic, ‘intersects with disablement and the impact this may have on teaching and research’ (2009: 126). Nevertheless, I do not attempt to reduce questions of dis/abled positionality to diagnosticism but to invest in productive dialogue with activists (and scholars) who identify as disabled persons and who have diverse backgrounds.

Ethical challenges are ever present in questions of embodied standpoint and the collective authorship of storytelling (Phillips and Bunda, 2020). Storying as a collaborative activity in contrast to the typical researcher-subject relation, holds ‘the risk to obscure the power relations at play between tellers and listeners’ (Janes, 2016: 79). As a researcher, I remain aware of this risk and reduce it by ensuring the most possible transparency of the research process, including the different roles as primarily an academic researcher and the roles of activist collaborators in the envisioned project. Additionally, challenges regarding (un)heard voices, (socially) accepted stories and modes of storytelling and overcoming limitations in understanding stories require continuous self-reflection (Krause et al., 2019).¹⁰ This may produce particular ethical issues for digital/hybrid research, including the blurring of boundaries between public and private spaces, accessibility and digitised inequality (franzke et al., 2020). Existing frameworks for (offline) research ethics may not be sufficient for digital research methods, particularly during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, when the amplification of the distribution of injustice demanded a turning point. New approaches to creating knowledge must consider co-production and working creatively with communities to embrace their knowledge traditions (Kara and Khoo, 2022). This must be reflected upon and reacted to with feminist disability activists throughout the collaborative storying process.

Digital disability activism as a means of storying ableism

Disability activism can take many forms and takes place in various spaces. Activism and activist alliances have in common that they combine personal tenacity, commitment and vision with experience and actions for change (Soldatic and Johnson, 2020). Recently, digital disability activism has grown strong, and is perhaps especially visible because of the recent pandemic. However, some view cyber activism with caution and question its impact on structural change. Disability has also been largely left out of analyses of activism in and through the new media. Despite this criticism, digital activism can be seen as (part of) a social movement in that it carries collective messages and ideas of social change. Digital expression has the potential to address disabled people’s concerns in ways that question the implicit compulsory able-bodiedness of the historical physical embodiment of social movements (Mann, 2018).¹¹ Disability activists in various nations have used the term ableism to criticise different forms of oppression and violence online and offline. Feminist disability activists from different countries and communities use their blogs and social media outlets to address ableism from a disability life writing perspective and some reach relatively large audiences. However, digital activists do not only story ableism individually, but they create digital movements and spaces of mutual learning by storying and sharing experiences of discrimination, for instance through the hashtag #ableismtellsme initiated by disabled US student Kayle Hill in September 2020 (Maskos, 2020). This hashtag has been used frequently by activists and other disabled social media users in the German-speaking countries, but most of the postings do not address the ideas of normality and human (body) norms that underpin their experience of discrimination. Ableism in its broader sense therefore remains largely uninterrogated, as do societal ability expectations as a source of oppression (Wesselmann, 2022).

Many but not all stories of discrimination that are posted with reference to ableism focus solely on disability, without taking intersectionality into account. Then again, there are other hashtag movements such as #disabilitytoowhite, started by Black disabled US social worker, writer and activist Vilissa Thompson, expressing criticism on that lacking intersectionality from the view of disabled people of colour (Biss, 2019). Still, many of these critics fail to address and conceptualise ableism more broadly and not just as a synonym for disablism. What is ableist in a specific situation and why, often remains implicit in the storying of ableism in digital activism. The following examples by feminist disability activists (with whom I am not personally acquainted) give an idea of what the digital storying of ableism may look like. In a series of video vignettes published on social media, Nina Tame,¹² a white British feminist disability activist and author, for instance storied how internalised ableism had long prevented her from using mobility aids, acknowledging needs and identifying as disabled. The video series received many responses from other social media users that related to the activists' experience of internalised ableism, and they continued storying internalised ableism by connecting their experience to the initial story. Some of the responses of other users included (mostly implicit) notions of abledness linked to productivity and energy that had made them question and shame themselves or ignore their fatigue. Some aspects of this storying indicate ableism's intersectionality with, for example, sexism in the ability expectation of preparing homecooked meals.

Sabrina Lorenz,¹³ a white German feminist disability activist, coach and author, explicitly points to intersections of ableism and sexism in storying experiences of ableism via social media. She shared a story of how a man approached her on the street and tried to impose his 'support'. If linked to historical and structural manifestations of ableism intersecting with sexism (e.g. male supremacy by denying women the right to vote, based on their allegedly inferior abilities and fragility), this story reveals notions of abledness in the form of the healthy, physically fit male from whom the disabled woman inevitably deviates and therefore on whose support and goodwill she depends. An example of storying discrimination under the hashtag #ableismtellsme by white feminist disability activist and author Tanja Kollodzieyski¹⁴ from Germany describes how a teacher had lower ability expectations of her than of her classmates and expressed this in a discriminatory manner. Other users responded by sharing similar experiences they had had with teachers, but both the initial posting and the responses did not address what it was precisely that constituted ableism in each situation. Nevertheless, the collective storying that can result from such digital interaction has the potential to concretise manifestations of ableism, if personal experience is linked to structural ableism, in this case in the educational system. It is not a coincidence that the teacher in this example had low(er) ability expectations of the disabled student. Instead, the disablism in the classroom experienced by the disabled activist is connected to a highly selective educational system whose logic of labelling and segregation often – at least implicitly – equates disability with (educational) inability and able-bodied/mindedness with (educational) ability (Wesselmann, 2022).

Many other disabled people who would not identify as activists post about their personal experience under #ableismtellsme as well as under other similar hashtags and may

find comfort or even empowerment in sharing accounts of discrimination. Feminist disability activists who address ableism on the other hand often explicitly aim to educate others in the digital spaces, for example by addressing discriminating/inappropriate and, in their view, ableist interactions with non-disabled people. The underexplored educational potential of most digital storying of ableism rests in making the implicit explicit and in exposing ableism's intersectionality. By connecting digital storying of experiences of denied access or support, and discrimination in the workplace or regarding motherhood, to the pressures of compulsory abledness (or able-bodiedness¹⁵), ableism is exposed as an oppressive practice. Not only disability activists but also many Disability Studies scholars (some are both) draw from experience to criticise oppression, especially when taking a feminist standpoint. Whilst the focus on personal experience has not remained uncriticised (e.g. Sheldon, 1999),¹⁶ approaches such as autoethnography and disability life writing are central to feminist Disability Studies. This does not mean that the storying and the theorisation of experience should be favoured over analyses of structural privileging and marginalisation, but that different levels of ableism and its intersectionality need to be discussed in their interrelatedness. Feminist disability activists' experience is central to storying ableism and theorising it further, as their work disrupts hegemonic (often male-dominated and reinforcing the dis/ability divide) narratives (Lafrance and McKenzie-Mohr, 2014). 'By honoring disability perspectives, such reimagining does feminist cultural work that has potentially wide-ranging consequences in the larger world' (Garland-Thomson, 2005: 1575). This is in line with an emphasis on situated scholarship as possibility to provide complex and potentially controversial understandings of disability to feminism.

Potentials and principles of digital activist storying

Research in the form of storying has wide-reaching educational and empowerment potentials.¹⁷ While digital spaces pose challenges to a storying approach to research, they also offer particular possibilities of engagement in relation to the principles of storying. The setting of most digital spaces such as social media allows mutual communication and therefore shared interpretation of storying with readers. Storying is an anti-hegemonic way of creating theory and meaning-making, and digital storying fulfils this principle by blurring supposedly clear lines between author/storyteller and reader/researcher. Through digital interaction between disability activists, and at times researchers, some stories are co-created and can be connected to broader political and societal discourse to criticise marginalising structures on different levels. The heightened accessibility of digital communication to some disabled people (but not others) has the potential to foster activism and allyship that may be impossible or very difficult to establish offline, including for instance transnational connections. Storying pushes 'back against oppressive and exclusionary metanarratives' (Phillips and Bunda, 2020: 50), which is particularly relevant in research with disabled people because as a group they are often objectified by academic research/ers. As Disability Studies remains closely linked to disability activism, many activist-scholars and ally-scholars in this field have pushed back against the oppression and objectification through, and exclusion from, research by

emphasising activist knowledge and collaboration. A paid collaboration with disability activists that partly takes place online offers networking possibilities for activism and allyship as well as the potential to create theory that can then be translated into action. Such action may take the form of further activist engagement, political positioning and briefing, or knowledge transfer via peer support by disabled activists, talks or lectures they may give in different educational settings, such as university courses for future professionals. By investing in such collaboration, the situatedness and embodiment of knowledges is honoured and recognised, and a feminist version of objectivity is employed, which recognises and reflects upon academia's power structures and hierarchies. The digital sphere adds to this feminist objectivity by providing a range of different storying perspectives in one place (e.g. under one hashtag or at a single social media platform), but it can also obscure the situatedness of knowledge due to a lack of relationality and personal information (Wahl and Zimmer, 2020).

Relationality and embodiment are highly relevant components of storying, as they nurture compassion for other human beings. Through embodied storying and 'the intimacy of teller and listener in the same space' (Phillips and Bunda, 2020: 61), we can approach the experiences of others and gain a deeper understanding of human difference as well as of inequality. While digital storying cannot provide physical embodiment, it offers other forms of relationality for the shaping of collective understandings and maybe in some cases even of collective identities through storying ableism together. Digital activism questions and disrupts the implicit able-bodiedness of the physical embodiment of social movements (Mann, 2018) and this is important for the acknowledgment of the educational and relational potential of digital activism as a means of storying ableism. Digital activism carries sometimes far-reaching collective messages and unites demands for social change that exceed the possibilities of in-person interactions. Digital storying of ableism may thus in some ways be even more relational than storying in a shared physical space, because of its reach – at least among some groups. The transregional and transnational reach of the digital sphere is one of its potentials, but stories and experience are deeply embedded in culture and histories. As Disability History approaches show, historic power dynamics and constructions of normality are highly relevant for understanding the specifics of dis/ability and ableism in different regions and cultures. Despite its alternative mode of embodiment, digital storying does not take place in a cultural, historical or social vacuum. Digital disability activism as a means of storying ableism must be viewed against its historical roots in the disability rights movement and the physical political protests of disabled activists in many countries (see: Berghs et al., 2021), which ultimately paved the way for digital activism today. The geopolitical and socioeconomic particularity of disability and ableism (Pieper and Mohammadi, 2014)¹⁸ can be exposed through digital disability activism, because it gathers the everyday experience, of oppression as well as empowerment, and first-person narratives of disabled people around the globe. The practically global accessibility of digital disability activism contributes to more diverse communities and perspectives, despite remaining asymmetries in the representation of more privileged voices (Mehrotra, 2021).

As (digital as well as in-person) storying is a collective process, ownership and authorship is also collective. In a research context, this 'counters the privileging of individual authorship in academia' (Phillips and Bunda, 2020: 64). The controversy between

individuality and collectivity of digital activism is challenging. On the one hand, individualisation and depoliticisation are viewed as core problems of social media activism, along with the commercialisation of activism due to a demand for frequent activity and a high quantity of content (Malafaia and Meriluoto, 2022). On the other hand, as illustrated by digital Black feminism, the simultaneous utilisation of social media for personal profit and racial justice activism does not have to be viewed as controversial as it ensures that Black women are visible and centralise themselves (Knight Steele, 2021). The same can be argued for digital feminist disability activism, particularly in light of its educational qualities in the form of awareness-raising and the risk of exploiting social media activists by using their work free of charge. Collectively, digital activism can expand and strengthen social movements, serve as an intersectional ‘coalition building tool’ (Mundt et al., 2018: 8) across movements and contribute to mobilisation beyond social media. Digital activist storying holds much potential, but there are so far unutilised possibilities to digital disability activism in storying ableism from a feminist intersectional approach that can be explored through the feminist working alliance that I propose above. While the creation of further theory is a central aspect to such a storying project, the connection of the existing literature serves as a foundation for a feminist intersectional approach to ableism.

Connecting intersectionality, ableism and feminist disability theory

There are three aspects of existing theory in particular that map the theoretical framework for the proposed approach. First, the connection of intersectionality theory with ableism strengthens the exposure of ableism on different levels (structural, identity, representational). Second, the existing literature frequently calls for the conceptualisation of ableism beyond Disability Studies, and while this is important it runs the risk of detaching ableism from its activist relevance. A collective storying approach to ableism from a feminist intersectional perspective can avoid this. Third, feminist disability theory and its critique of an artificial dis/ability binary in relation to the gendered body serves as a starting point for the anchoring of ableism within broader feminist theory.

Ableism’s intersectionality is evident in its wide-ranging effects and its interdisciplinary theoretical framework. As ableism ‘produces processes and systems of entitlement and exclusion’, it ‘institutes the reification and classification of populations’ (Campbell, 2017: 287f.) through its dividing practices. Mutually forming and coexisting ideas of disabled/abled are only one aspect of this classification and division. The interweaving of dis/ability with gender and race plays an important part in the process of constituting normal and pathological bodies (Campbell, 2009; Bailey and Mobley, 2019), as well as with sexuality (McRuer, 2010) and social class (Wolbring, 2006). Sexism is partly driven by ableism in that, to justify patriarchy, it labels women as not having certain abilities; meanwhile, historically, racism was directly based on the assumption that certain ethnic groups had a lower intellectual capacity than others (Wolbring, 2008). Today, more subtle intersections of racism, ableism and sexism continue, for instance in the

controversial framing of Black women as strong and resilient, and thus abled, but at the same time as pathologically subhuman (Bailey and Mobley, 2019). Most of the existing work on ableism has a primary focus on disability, or disability linked to one other referential category such as gender, migration status or race, and does not include a multi-level intersectional analysis. Intersectionality studies, on the other hand, often do not explicitly include dis/ability. While ableism should be considered as a relevant hierarchy of power in feminist and intersectional studies, ableism theory would benefit from drawing more thoroughly from intersectionality's focus on multiple, interlocking forms of identity and oppression. Black feminists such as Patricia Hill Collins (1991) and Kimberlé W. Crenshaw (1997) have identified different aspects or levels of oppression that together shape domination/subordination. Structural, political (or identity) and representational aspects of intersectionality are 'metaphors for different ways in which women of color are situated between categories of race and gender when the two are regarded as mutually exclusive' (Crenshaw, 1997: 249). Those aspects/levels must each be considered in their specific (social, political, economic and historical) context. At the same time, each form of 'social division' (Yuval-Davis, 2006: 199) has its own ontological basis that shows how its meaning can vary, be challenged and be restructured. Discourses on dis/ability are particularly vague and heterogeneous, with a common denominator being that 'they involve discourses of "normality" from which all disabled people are excluded' (Yuval-Davis, 2006: 201). This complexity implies questions on the possibilities and challenges of exploring ableism beyond a one-dimensional focus on the dis/ability binary.

A methodological intersectionality issue that is relevant to the proposed feminist intersectional approach to ableism is categorical complexity. On the one hand, ableism is fluid and processual, related to a cultural model of disability (Waldschmidt, 2018), and its study contests seemingly fixed categories such as disabled and abled, taking a somewhat anti-categorical stance. On the other hand, feminist activist criticism of ableism is strongly based on collective identity and a focus on social groups (e.g. disabled women) 'at neglected points of intersection' (McCall, 2005: 1774), which is typical for an intra-categorical approach. A feminist intersectional approach to ableism, however, requires an inter-categorical approach that uses categories strategically. Inter-categorical approaches connect experience with identity and structural conditions, including historical intersections of gender, race and disability (Erevelles and Minear, 2010). Methodologically, a multi-level, relational analysis of intersectionality links the levels of structures, identity and representation through social practices (of difference) and operates between pre-determined categories (class, gender, race and body) on the structural level and categorical openness on the identity and representational level of intersectionality (Winkler and Degele, 2010). Given the criticism on the delocation and depoliticisation of intersectionality (Bilge, 2013), a feminist intersectional approach to ableism must be doubly cautious to avoid the detachment of theories from the social movements that coined them. In the aspiration of Disability Studies, intersectionality and feminism to challenge hegemonic ways of knowledge production lies the necessity to build any further storying/theorisation of ableism from an intersectional perspective on close interaction with feminist disability activists.

The concept of ableism is 'not limited to the discourse around abilities of the body and abilities of disabled people' (Maskos, 2015; Wolbring, 2012: 79). Ableism has far-

reaching discriminatory effects on disabled people, but the preference of certain abilities over others does not have to be negative. This means that a radical critique of ableism does not aim to eliminate all forms of ability preference or attribution, especially since the notion of abilities (and effort) serves mutual acknowledgment and societal organisation (Buchner et al., 2015). From a broader perspective, the study of ability beyond a sole focus on disability embodiment initiates important discussions of ‘ability privilege’ (Wolbring, 2014: 118) in fields outside of Disability Studies, such as Critical Animal Studies,¹⁹ Peace Studies or, especially in the light of the current hype around artificial intelligence, Technoscience. Normative ideas on body/mind functioning that underpin assistive technology and that intertwine with the illusion (yet ideal) of independence are a form of technoableism and call for blending Critical Disability Studies with Technoscience (Shew, 2020). By viewing, for instance, violence and abuse through an ‘ability studies lens’, structural violence may be understood as the gap between ability expectations (e.g. ‘the ability to experience the absence of structural violence’) and their fulfilments (Wolbring, 2020: 50). The expectation to be able to live in peace and to experience equality is generally positive, but still enables or privileges some groups or individuals, whilst disabling others. Ability expectations define our relations with others from the individual to the national level and beyond, which is why they may enable or disable a culture of peace (Wolbring, 2019). Earned or unearned ability privileges such as consumption and competitiveness play an important role in many areas of life, including the environment and access to resources based on achievement (Wolbring, 2014).

Such a focus on ability favouritism and ableism claims not to blank out disability or the experience of disabled people, but to view the dis/ability binary as only one manifestation of a much larger system of thought. However, somewhere between consequently conceptualising ableism beyond Disability Studies and theorising ableism increasingly separately from its activist relevance, ableism theory becomes or remains inaccessible to many who are most affected by ableism. The relevance of ability expectations and ableism exceeds Disability Studies and calls for more intersectional research on ableism that should nevertheless continuously engage with a critical debate on the ‘dis/ability complex’ (Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2016: 4). Storying ableism together with disability activists from a perspective that foregrounds making theory more accessible can avoid reserving this debate for the ‘intellectual elite’ (Phillips and Bunda, 2020: 45). While ‘many academics outside the realm of disability studies might find it fruitful [...] to investigate cultural aspects of ability preferences’ (Wolbring, 2012: 81), ableism’s activist origin needs to be acknowledged and continuously anchored in future feminist scholarship on ableism. Disabled women have, after all (without explicit reference to ableism terminology), long highlighted the intersectional complexities of abledness (Ewinkel and Hermes, 1992).²⁰

Critical questions on both femaleness and disability can be answered through an ableism framework, as ableism reinforces the specialness of disability as well as the unruliness of the female body (Campbell, 2009). Feminist debates within Disability Studies question the artificiality of the dis/ability binary in relation to the gendered body. The binary division of disability/ability legitimates power asymmetries through the formation of culture and preserves and validates ‘privileged designations such as beautiful, healthy,

normal, fit, competent, intelligent' (Garland-Thomson, 2002: 5f). Activism is one of the domains of feminist theory that would profit from considering dis/ability more thoroughly, as to understand disability is to understand what it means to be fully human. What (feminist disability) activism entails is variable, but it may include academic activism or 'academic tolerance' (Garland-Thomson, 2002: 28) of anti-hegemonic research approaches, such as the proposed working alliance with activists for a feminist intersectional approach to ableism. Life writings by disabled women are highly relevant for understanding unruly gendered disabled bodies in their discursivity and lived experience, because stories of embodiment between subjective experience and cultural constructions challenge hegemonic feminist theory and complicate 'standard ways of conceiving of the body' (Mintz, 2007: 7). Through their subjectivity, first-person narratives of dis/ability unleverage the culture/nature binary that is still often associated with gender and disability theory. Women's narratives of disability and illness disrupt hegemonic ideas about normal bodies and their functioning, within and beyond feminist theory (Mintz, 2007). Thus, intersecting modes of embodiment and subjectivity should, linked to structural aspects, clearly be at the centre of a feminist intersectional approach to ableism.

Disability Studies in general have been criticised for their underlying and mostly unacknowledged whiteness (Bell, 2006).²¹ Feminist Disability Studies scholars recognised the need to integrate race into their frameworks early on but were often not able to do so. Works of Black feminist scholars outside of Disability Studies (including those of intersectionality scholars) can 'provide a methodological map for the integration of disability, race, and gender, even when disability is not named as such' (Bailey and Mobley, 2019: 22). Black feminist texts may implicitly address dis/ability and the body through impairment due to, for instance, slavery, cancer and the dissemblance of various forms of violence (Schalk, 2020). Additionally, questions about the body in care work and on the labour market (Bailey and Mobley, 2019) point to the importance of Black feminist studies in theorising ableism beyond the (already acquired) embodiment of disability. The so far largely unrecognised insights by Black feminist writers on abledness and ableism through such works are an important new perspective for ableism theory and research. An intersectional feminist approach to ableism should therefore refrain from being a mere white feminist approach to ableism (without obscuring that it is proposed from a white perspective), most importantly through a working alliance that includes feminist disability activists of colour, but also by learning from, for example, Black feminist scholarship.

This discussion of existing literature as the basis from which to create further theory in the form of a feminist intersectional approach to ableism points to the potentials of activist-academic collaboration in storying ableism. Storying ableism is central to concretising its theoretical complexities and it offers important perspectives for Disability Studies, feminist theory and intersectionality theory.

Conclusion

I have proposed a feminist intersectional approach to storying/theorising ableism, argued for the potential of digital disability activism as a means of storying and connected

intersectionality theory with ableism and feminist disability theory as a foundation for the creation of further theory. The proposed storying approach to ableism has yet to be translated into (research) practice; nevertheless, its conceptualisation adds a new perspective that consequently combines digital activism with theory and research to the growing scholarship on ableism. The envisioned working alliance is a form of anti-hegemonic knowledge production from which not only the research itself (and myself as a scholar) but also feminist disability activism and allyship may benefit due to the establishing of networks, the making of connections and the creation of relationality through collectively storying ableism. This provokes possibilities for the further creation of intersectionality theory in the broader field of feminist studies, as it highlights that the relevance of a feminist intersectional approach to ableism exceeds the field of Disability Studies by far. Through the lens of such an approach, different forms and effects of ableism in all areas of life and in various fields of practice can be exposed, reaching from internalised ableism and questions of identity to the reinforcement of the dis/ability binary through media representations of abledness and disability, to structural ableism inherent to the social service system due to narrow access criteria. By engaging in paid cooperation with feminist activists from different backgrounds in various settings, their stories and lived experience gain even more educational potential and their activist wisdom is honoured, beyond the field of Disability Studies.

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Notes

1. Mintz highlights the relevance of life writings by disabled women to understand unruly gendered disabled bodies in their discursivity and lived experience, arguing that stories of embodiment between subjective experience and cultural constructions challenge hegemonic feminist theory.
2. Simplican reconstructs two strands of feminist disability life writing that build on different theoretical approaches and contest ableism differently, with more contemporary work focusing on ambiguity and thus unsettling the dis/ability binary.
3. Wolbring's approach to ableism is focused on the de/valorisation of abilities, ability expectations and ability privilege as a legitimization of power relations.
4. Campbell's definitions of ableism centrally refer to the corporeal standard and abledness as referential categories to distinguish between the normal and the dispensable.

5. Garland-Thomson emphasises the possibility of situated scholarship, including autoethnography and disability life writing, for providing complex and potentially controversial understandings of disability to feminism.
6. Kollodzieyski views this reduction of ableism as problematic, because disablism is only one aspect of ableism.
7. Elm and Haupt discuss that scoping reviews may be expanded beyond scholarship to include additional sources relevant to a specific research interest. A concept map then gives an overview of different sources and outlines different aspects and possibly ambiguities of the concept in question.
8. Winkler and Degele conceptualise a multi-level, relational analysis of intersectionality that links the levels of structures, identity and representation through social practices (of difference).
9. In a postcolonial analysis, Janes critically reflects upon the paradox of collaborative research that claims to represent authentic voices while academic privilege remains throughout various research practices.
10. Krause et al. identified these and other challenges in their participatory storytelling research that focused primarily on the social interactions and interpretation of storytelling, rather than (only) on the content of storytelling.
11. Based on the example of the Twitter campaign #CripTheVote in a US context, Mann emphasises the relevance of engaging with a social movement perspective to theorise new dimensions of social change and participation through digital disability activism.
12. Nina Tame writes about and advocates against ableism on different social media channels (see for instance: https://www.instagram.com/nina_tame/ [accessed 27 March 2023]) and wrote a chapter of the collection *We've Got This: Stories of Disabled Parenting*, edited by Eliza Hull (2023).
13. Sabrina Lorenz founded her blog, <https://www.fragmentsofliving.com/> (accessed 27 March 2023), to empower other disabled people, and as an educator she also supports companies and groups in reducing prejudice and implementing inclusion.
14. Tanja Kollodzieyski has published her work in the (German-language) booklet *Ableismus* and advocates for disability rights and against ableism on her blog, <https://thabs.de/> (accessed 27 March 2023), and via her social media accounts.
15. McRuer (2010) connects queer theory with Disability Studies to elaborate a theory of compulsory able-bodiedness that unveils and contests the able-bodied culture that promotes the collective preference of able-bodied identities and perspectives.
16. Sheldon criticises how feminism is sometimes reduced to individual descriptive accounts of disability within Disability Studies, because they neither explain nor improve disabled women's position in society. Instead, she pleads for challenging oppressive structures and institutions.
17. In their book *Research Through, with and as Storying*, Phillips and Bunda (2020) propose five principles of storying that I draw on in this article.
18. Pieper and Mohammadi propose a specific analysis of ableism in geopolitical and socioeconomic contexts based on an analysis of labour market barriers in Germany that revealed how the status as an immigrant intersects with notions of deviance from an able-minded/-bodied standard.
19. Wolbring argues that ability privileges such as on the level of cognition play an important role in relations based on ability expectations and that they are, amongst other relations, generated by arguments used about the human–animal relationship.

20. In their seminal collection *Geschlecht: Behindert. Besonderes Merkmal: Frau* (Gender: Disabled. Special Characteristic: Woman), first published in 1985, Ewinkel and other disabled women activists in Germany documented their gendered experience and fight for recognition.
21. Bell was one of the first to famously expose that Disability Studies are in fact White Disability Studies.

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