Disability Visibility Podcast

Episode 34: Intersectionality

Guests: Sandy Ho and Jean-Luc Pierite

Host: Alice Wong

Transcript by Cheryl Green

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Introduction

[radio static, voices singing with hip-hop beat]

LATEEF MCLEOD: This is the Disability Visibility Podcast with your host, Alice Wong.

ALICE WONG: Hey hey hey! Welcome to the *Disability Visibility Podcast*, conversations on disability politics, culture, and media. I'm your host Alice Wong. Today's episode is about intersectionality with Sandy Ho and Jean-Luc Pierite. Jean-Luc works at the Fab Foundation, a non-profit based in Boston and is the President of the Board of Directors for the North American Indian Center of Boston. Sandy is a community organizer and the founder of the Disability & Intersectionality Summit, which will take place on October 13th in Cambridge, Massachusetts with an affiliate event in Berkeley, California. Both Sandy and Jean-Luc will share what intersectionality means to them and their involvement with the Summit. I also wanna take this moment to recognize and cite Black feminist, legal scholar, and civil rights leader Kimberlé Crenshaw who was the first to use the term "intersectionality." Are you ready? Away we go!

[electronic beeping]

ELECTRONIC VOICE: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1.

ALICE: So Sandy and Jean-Luc, thank you so much for being on my podcast tonight.

SANDY HO: Yeah, no. This is awesome!

JEAN-LUC PIERITE: Thank you for having us. Thank you.

ALICE: Sandy and Jean-Luc, why don't you both kinda introduce yourselves and just share a little bit about yourselves? So Jean-Luc, do you wanna go first?

JEAN-LUC: So my name is Jean-Luc Pierite. I'm originally from New Orleans, Louisiana. I'm a member of the Tunica-Biloxi tribe of Louisiana, which is a federally-recognized tribe. And I was born with a mild case of cerebral palsy. I live in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts with my partner and our dog. Her name is Luna. But here in Boston, I work for a local non-profit called the Fab Foundation, which is a non-profit that we foster the growth of what's called the international Fab Lab Network. These are digital fabrication labs. We have them over 1,000 worldwide in over 100 different countries. And also, I'm President of the Board of Directors at the North American Indian Center of Boston.

ALICE: Great. Thank you, Jean-Luc. And how about you, Sandy?

SANDY: Hello. My name is Sandy Ho. And yeah, I'm born, raised, and educated in the Boston area, and I am one of co-organizers and the founder of the Disability & Intersectionality Summit. I'm also a Co-instructor of an interdisciplinary Disability Studies course for undergrads at Wellesley University.

ALICE: Great. Thank you, Sandy.

The Disability & Intersectionality Summit

ALICE: And all three of us are involved with the Disability & Intersectionality Summit, which is coming up later this Fall, on October 13th, 2018 in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Jean-Luc, why don't you tell me a little bit about how you first learned about the summit and your involvement with this event.

JEAN-LUC: Yes, thank you. So Sandy reached out to me. At the time, the Disability & Intersectionality Summit was looking for an Indigenous speaker because I believe that the event was gonna be happening around what we now call Indigenous Peoples Day here in Boston and Cambridge. But historically, people would know it as Christopher Columbus Day, but we're moving past that legacy and centering Indigenous people. And so part of that sort of outreach was to have somebody come to the summit and give sort of, kind of speak on the event, welcome of the traditional Indigenous territory that's here. At the same time, I said, oh my goodness. This is great because not only am I Native American, but I was born with mild CP, and I'm also queer. And so it's like oh my goodness. You know, it was a dream that I could actually be in an event and kind of speak on everything. So it's just excited to be a part of this and excited for the opportunity.

SANDY: This being our second time around doing the Intersectionality Summit, there are so many variable, I guess you could say, that I'm looking forward to. So I approached this organizing of the event, and I see it [inaudible]. There's like the programmatic piece of it and then the operations of it. And just the fact that we are centering it in Cambridge, Massachusetts at MIT, there's that space of being in a higher ed institution but also just physically, we're going to have a lot more space available to us than the first time. Program-wise, inviting Jean-Luc to this, as he mentioned, was such a happy chain of events that had unfolded naturally. Because when I reached out to him, yes, that was when I learned that Jean-Luc—if it's OK for me—it's so rare that you get to identify wholly as a person.

JEAN-LUC: Yes.

SANDY: And so that is one of the things that I'm always looking forward to regarding the event that I'm organizing, just that natural human interaction and getting to meet other people that I honestly would not have otherwise come across. Because so often, I think in our organizing, I think Alice, in the disability community, we tend to interact or hear from a lot of the same voices. Yeah, that's one of the best parts of the Intersectionality Summit is you never know who you're gonna meet, and I'm so excited to be able to learn from other people.

ALICE: Well, I think definitely for me, it's like so many events where I might be the only Asian American with a disability, but I see another person color. We just kinda glom onto each other, like, "Hello, my friend!"

JEAN-LUC: Yes.

ALICE: And we shouldn't be unicorns.

SANDY: Yeah.

JEAN-LUC: Right.

ALICE: This is a meeting of unicorns, and this is where it's our space and our time. And I think this is where like, how do we build upon this to make it more of the default everywhere? And I think that's hopefully the legacy and the message that events like this will send to other people. Jean-Luc, tell me about what you're excited about.

JEAN-LUC: Oh, yeah. So I mean just kind of building off of the idea of being the unicorn in the event, you know. I've been at conferences in many ways, even just the compartmentalized version of myself. Like just being a Native American, being an Indigenous person, we kind of fall into this idea of the community members and the academics. And so when community members show up to some of these conferences, you get somewhat of the fawning over of like, oh my god. Thank you for being here. Thank you for, you know, it's so wonderful that you're here, and you're represented. And it almost feels, in a way, that we have to carve out a corner for ourselves. And so that's what made me happy about this conference, was that Sandy, very deliberately and very intentionally reached out to our community and said, "This is happening around this date, and we want your voice to be a part of this." And so that, for me, that was the big draw. Not only was I there, invited to be the unicorn or be somebody to occupy the corner, but just to share in the sense of community with other people. I think that that's the biggest thing for me.

ALICE: Mmhmm. Agreed.

Jean-Luc's involvement with Indigenous communities and how disability comes up

ALICE: And I guess, Jean-Luc, I'm kinda curious about, within Asian-American circles, I talk about disability. And yet, it's not really seen or discussed as much. So it's interesting. I'm curious about your own involvement with Indigenous communities, and I'm curious about like, how much does disability come up, or does it come up at all?

JEAN-LUC: I think that for starters, we do, it is a concern. And I think that there's, just kind of thinking about some of the issues that we, as Native people, face, it's certainly a common conversation that we have. And I don't know if this is kind of in the broader sense for broader communities of color, but there's almost like a cultural apprehension towards Western medicine. And so there tends to be kind of a lot of issues that perhaps go under the radar of course, like issues of mental health and disability and even just primarily like self-care. And those are complicated by issues of substance abuse and addiction. And so there's a lot of interconnectedness and ways that people are disabled, or in some ways, there's this legacy of colonialism that we have to kind of overcome in order for us to kind of treat ourselves better and understand what our issues actually are. So that kind of matrix that we have to navigate.

That said, with the activism piece, a lot of what we face is centered around sort of like issues of representation. Right now, one of the legislative pushes that we have is to support a bill which is a proposed ban on Native mascots in public schools here in Massachusetts. And Massachusetts has 40 public schools that have Native mascots. This is a issue that, you know, it's not just something that's a cartoon or that's disconnected from us, but it's something that impacts our youth and contributes to lower self-esteem, of course. Native youths have twice the suicide rate to their white counterparts. So we take things very seriously. And we always kind of try to address whether these are issues about representation, whether these are issues about funding, we always kind of take a public health approach to every issue that we face. So yeah, those are some of the things that kinda come to mind when I talk about the overall health of the community, but then how disability impacts us as well.

ALICE: Yeah. I also think a lot about a lot of the commonalities about different communities of color, and one area I think is really not addressed as much is about trauma, about historical trauma, emotional trauma by a people as a result of genocide, as a result of occupation, and clearly, colonialism. And I think that's a huge part of so many people, whether they're identified as disabled or not. But obviously, for marginalized communities, there's a lot of stuff that's happening that's not really, there's no language for it yet. Or it's not really identified yet.

[mellow music]

I think that's another thing that's really fascinating is just the way different cultures perceive difference. So is there anything you wanna share in terms of your own personal language and your heritage about disability?

JEAN-LUC: Yeah, yeah. So my grandfather, who was our first tribal Chairman, I have recordings of him telling stories from when he was a child. The idea of what we know of right now as like going to the doctor's office or the hospital, that was something that wasn't as, either it wasn't readily available because for his time, services were for white Americans, for Black Americans. But for Native Americans, there was very little to no services, whether that was education or health or something like that. And so there was sort of the historical concept of community doctors, the man or the woman that would come to the house and kind of look you over and prescribe what we now know of as kind of folks medicine. But to our people, this is our prayers, our ceremonies, they're the sacred connection that we have with the plants. These are things that really helped our people. And so going from that generation to my father's generation to me right now, there's a whole shift in paradigm as far as what it means to take care of yourself and to take care of others.

ALICE: Can you speak more about that in terms of what that shift is and what the current paradigm is?

JEAN-LUC: From my experience, going from something like that where people were relying on folk medicine, and then going into my generation with me, and my mom kind of going through the motions of when I was a baby, I had to go back and forth into the hospital. And as a part of my condition, the doctor had to break my left ankle in order for my feet to line up so that I could actually walk. That kind of introduced a lot more reliance on Western medicine, I would say. And it wasn't really until I was almost in middle school I think when my mom became aware that there were services like physical therapy that I could go through and get myself to where I could actually be a little bit more mobile, be a little bit more functional. Because of my condition, my family was able to learn about what services were there, learn about what advances that there were. So there is that.

[mellow music]

How Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality plays out in your lives

ALICE: Today's episode is about intersectionality, and I wanna bring it back to acknowledge Dr. Kimberlé Crenshaw who is the person who created the concept of intersectionality. And she wrote in a 2015 *Washington Post* piece about this subject, and she wrote, "Intersectionality is an analytic sensibility, a way of thinking about identity and its relationship to power." How does intersectionality play out in your own lives?

SANDY: Yeah, so I think that even before I knew about intersectionality or I even had a sense of what my different identities were, that relationship to power was always very present in my life, even as a child, and then more so as I owned up and claimed my identity. But I think as a marginalized person, there's never a sense when I'm not aware of the power that is around me or the power that I wield now because I do have privileges. And again, my education, the fact that I have a job, housing, language. But intersectionality has always been that, I think about it as the atmosphere that has always been around my life [inaudible].

I think I really appreciate what Jean-Luc shared about being able to connect his family with Western forms of medicine because similarly to that, my parents were refugees and immigrants, and I am the only child in the family with a disability. So that sense of what a disability in culture, within learning culture and medicine, that power and that access to resources, I always saw my parents needing to not make sacrifices and carve out a life for them, but for me. And I always saw their life as something that had to do with the transactions in power in some ways. So yeah.

ALICE: Great. Thank you. How about you, Jean-Luc?

JEAN-LUC: Yeah. I think that even, and it's so odd. I just wanna comment that it's so odd that even this conversation, I have to kinda go back to my earliest memories to just kind of express a lot of my experience. This is really a little bit therapeutic for me. [chuckles]

ALICE: I'm glad. I'm glad. I'm glad for that.

JEAN-LUC: But even just going back to those memories and trying to figure out what those early concepts were. Certainly, I saw my family struggle because of the external, I can label them systems right now, but forces or whatever it was, that there was something always that was kind of like there was a reason why my grandfather didn't advance beyond like 6th grade education. There was a reason why my tribe didn't have the funding for services even when they became federally-recognized. And so for some of the listeners that are perhaps not aware, tribes in the United States, for a few centuries, were told basically to kinda give up our way of life, whatever the culture was of the tribe. Because we have hundreds of tribes in the United States with many different cultures. And so, but the federal government was trying to either annihilate or then assimilate the people. And this happened for hundreds of years. It was in the 1930s with the Indian Reorganization Act, and there was sort of a seven-point test that tribes were given to prove that they continued to be who they were. And so this kind of goes into the ability of the tribe to assert its own sovereignty and to be put on the same footing as the government of the United States. Simplified, but hopefully that's enough to kinda convey what a government-to-government relationship is.

But that said, there's all of that external force of the settler state and the Native nation that's there. And then you have kind of the bottleneck of funds for the tribe. And so all of this goes down to the families and the youth that are affected. And so definitely, there were reasons why I had the experience that I had, or I watched my mom try to get whatever donations of food that we could get just so that we could have a meal for that night. And so there's that. There's the external systems, and then there's the personal scope, just kind of dealing with my own disability. And then when that lessens, that's when my sexual orientation kind of came into play and complicated that matter. So I had this journey of asserting my identity as a Native person while my family is trying to revitalize the culture of my whole tribe. And so my tribe was going through a process of a reclamation of identity. I was trying to assert my identity, and then I had other facets that I was trying to reconcile within the scope of all of these external systems. So definitely, that really informed the way that I navigated growing up.

[rhythmic music]

SANDY: When you talk about your tribe needing to reassert its place in relation to the US government, it sort of reminds me of a lot of disabled people that I talk to talking about this day in their life where they had another coming out, reclaiming that disability identity. And that process, that personal process one, it's one thing to claim an identity, but then it's another to also find a place within the community of that identity and to find their role in it. And where there just was, it went around my mind when you were talking about that, whether it was about [inaudible] or disability. That, to me, is exemplifying intersectionality there.

ALICE: And I feel like this is why events like your summit, the Summit is so important is that not only do we find solidarity with one and other and all of the different communities that we're a part of, but there's also that aspect of visibility and being who we are, being our full selves and being really comfortable and unapologetic about it. And I think coming together and not being othered, for us just to be just our usual selves, totally like not having to do the performative and emotional labor that comes from having to represent all the time, I think that's really unique and really necessary.

SANDY: Yeah, absolutely.

Hopes for this summit and the future

ALICE: So I guess I wanna end with any final comments, but I do have a final question. What are your hopes for this summit in the future? What are some of your dreams in terms of what you'd like to see going forward?

SANDY: In gathering the bodies and [inaudible] and experiences on that day, I do want to leave evidence beyond October 13th, 2018 that this not only happened but that what was shared is documented or recorded or is accessible. Again, going back to that piece of accessibility: organizing is accessible to other people on October 13th, but also to our future disability community members and beyond. Because if we're not doing this for future members of disabled community and other disability folks, I think that's being irresponsible of us. We do need to lead the way and to provide, like we said, exposure and disability through different ways of resistance and just being ourselves and that we're rocking it every day, right? So that's definitely one of my dreams, is that what is captured there and what was done beyond itself and beyond the present political climate. Even without this incredibly racist and oppressive administration, it's not because of what's going on that this is needed. This is needed because we are needed as people and as marginalized communities. So there's that.

And just moving forward, you know, I want to continue to be an example or to be a way of possibilities of collaboration within the disability community or not, because there are many organizations in disability that could be doing better. And I want to not call them out but to call them in and invite them to this day and to join us and to see what it is that we are doing differently and have actions. We really need to start to shake up the structures of what is happening now.

ALICE: Thanks. And any final comments, Jean-Luc, you'd like to share?

JEAN-LUC: From my own tribe, my grandfather passed a story down to me. Off in the woods from where our tribal land is, there's this man. He has one arm, one leg, half a face all covered in hair, and he lives in the trees. And early in the morning, he'll come and take one of the children away. But the people don't have to worry about the child because that half-man, he's actually the keeper of like all the knowledge of the plants and everything. And there's a trial, but then after the trial, the child learns how to work the plants and then, as my grandfather would say, become the best doctor in the world. And I related to that story. Because of my CP, I was like, sometimes I do feel like that half-man like that, but then, I don't have to think of it as a pitiful thing because this is somebody that actually keeps the medicine. That's somebody that's empowered. And so that's what, outside of being there, building community, building coalitions with other intersectional people, I want us to kind of walk away and really understand that we are gifted in more ways than we realize.

ALICE: Thank you so much.

JEAN-LUC: Thank you.

SANDY: Yeah, no. This was awesome!

Wrap-up

[hip hop]

ALICE: This podcast is a production of the Disability Visibility Project, an online community dedicated to creating, sharing, and amplifying disability media and culture. All episodes including text transcripts are available at DisabilityVisibilityProject.com/Podcast.

You can also find the links about Sandy, Jean-Luc, and the Disability & Intersectionality Summit on our website.

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Thanks for listening, and see you on the Internets! Byeee!!

♪ How far will they go?
Oh yeah yeah
How far will they go?
Oh yeah yeah
How far will they go?
Oh yeah yeah…. ♪