

Opening Doors, Season 1, Episode 4

ChrisTiana ObeySumner: Intersectionality

Narrator: Welcome to Opening Doors, a podcast about accessibility in arts and civic life brought to you by the Seattle Cultural Accessibility Consortium and Jack Straw Cultural Center. For our first season, we aim to amplify the voices of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color with disabilities, and to learn how race and disability impact their access to arts and culture. Here is your host, Elizabeth Ralston, founder of the Seattle Cultural Accessibility Consortium.

Elizabeth Ralston: I'm here today with ChrisTiana ObeySumner. They are a black and Indigenous, queer, non-binary, and multiply-disabled person. They are the CEO of Epiphanies of Equity, a social equity consulting firm that particularly specializes in social change, intersectionality, anti-racism and disability justice. For almost two decades, they have dedicated their life and career to amplifying the importance of social equity, particularly narrative identity development and its role in cultural humility and ally ship. Bringing awareness to the lived experience of racialized ableism and externalizing anti-blackness and dismantling the sacral social paradigms that underlie social injustice and inaction. Welcome, I'm so glad to have you here today!

ChrisTiana ObeySumner : Thank you. All of these topics are so important to discuss, and I wish we had, you know, more time to cover everything thoroughly. But let's start with the important one, intersectionality. So, years ago, my daughter's eight grade class participated in a film festival in which they created and produced their own short films. I remember one of the teens making a movie on intersectionality and it was the first time I really learned about the term in depth. So, let's start by defining intersectionality for our listeners and giving some examples of how this comes into play when we talk about accessibility.

CO: I think the first quick thing about intersectionality is that there's a contemporary way of using and there's a historical origin of it. And so, I think especially at my intersectionality, it gets really complicated because I represent both. So, the original intention of intersectionality was to specifically talk about when you have one or two marginalized, oppressed or exploited identities that come together and have an intersecting impact of oppression. So, originally Kimberlé Crenshaw, who was a legal scholar, coined the term when she discovered that black women in the 80's were being discriminated against and not able to get jobs in auto-manufacturing plant. The manufacturing plant- so they did hire black folks and women and they did. But they hired primarily black men for back-up house, warehouse work and primarily white women, for front of house administrative work. And so, there was this sort of double jeopardy that caused them to not be able to get a job.

CO: Nowadays, intersectionality is used when you're talking about one or more of your identity that comes together and has an impact. So, for example, you can have two or more identities that are, say, privileged. You could be, say a white, cis- gendered, heterosexual man and people may still consider that your intersectionality. And that's why it gets a little tricky. Because there- I'm not saying there isn't intersectional impacts of what it means to walk through this world with a level of privilege; privilege being something that I define as anything that you have a choice in having to think about or navigate in your everyday life. So if you woke up today and you didn't have to think about whether or not your body's gonna get you from point A to point B to what you need to do, then you have a privilege- [laughs]

CO: of that. So, that's kind of what that means. So, I think what's difficult is for some people who are using the more contemporary version of intersectionality, what's really difficult for me is trying to explain that that sort of intersectionality that's more generalized is not the intersectionality I'm talking about when I'm bringing in, like you said, being black, Indigenous, assigned female at birth, queer, non-binary, a person of size, disabled person [laughs] You know, all those different sorts of things-

CO: I've been using the system device, you know, all these things. So, I think that if anything, my biggest barrier is sort of, this watering down, to put it lightly, of the term itself.

ER: You just put that so beautifully and I feel like I've learned so much from you over the last year because when I first started my work in accessibility and the consortium, I was thinking about accessibility for everyone and I didn't realize that there were so many different levels of access, even though it was a subconscious thing. But over the last year, I have realized that BIPOC with disabilities have a much greater struggle in access than a white person like myself with a disability and, you know, it was very humbling to realize that and wanting to become more of an ally to help people understand the differences in what you call intersectionality. So, let's move onto access in healthcare, for example.

ER: You've talked a lot about your struggle in this arena and so, I'd love to hear some examples of how this comes into play with intersectionality in your access to healthcare.

CO: The struggle with this question is I can tell a lot of individual stories but there is an aggregate of individual stories that's happening right now with this pandemic. That I don't even have to tell my story because it fits into a larger narrative of why black and brown folks are so disproportionately impacted not just in contracting the virus, in maternal death rates, in diagnoses of developmental and intellectual cognitive and psychiatric disabilities, in access to insurance, in health systems that will actually take people seriously when they come in. Black women, in particular, are 3x more likely to die of a heart-related emergency in an ER than a white woman. A black woman is 3-4 times more likely to die in childbirth or in their maternal stages than a white woman.

CO: This is just what is happening. On top of that, we're fish in toxic water. So, for example, back home cause I live- I lived in like, the Philadelphia Camden County area. There was a lot of what they called sacrifice zones. These were parts of the area of neighborhoods that were disproportionately black and brown, that a city planner or administrator of some sort would say, "okay we'll we have to put this power plant here" or "we had to put this Way Treatment Center here" or "we had to put this- this highway here" and they know that there's gonna be pollutants that go off into a certain space. What they would do is they would sacrifice certain areas that they already saw as, you know, as "well, this is already, you know, let's just have it go there". So, then you look at places like in the Bronx, there's a neighborhood called Asthma Alley. They have 7x the asthma hospitalizations typically than the rest of the nation. And they're disproportionate black and brown. Their asthma rates are so high because they're part of that sacrifice zone. So you think about a pandemic that's coming through, that's a respiratory illness, where you have a high- a high population of black and brown folks with asthma and other respiratory conditions because we live in a system that has institutionally and administratively discriminated against them by putting them in a sacrifice zone and then, we go into the hospital with these issues. And the hospital tells us that we just need to live healthier?

CO: So, there is a- there's this larger sort of system- [laughs]

CO: that is way bigger I think even just me, but I think there's- there's individual stories I can share but I think at the large set of it, what I really want folks to see is that this is way bigger. It's- it's

CO: I always say it's like a matrix or something, it's way bigger than just a single story.

ER: It seems like the pandemic has really. . . laid for us so many inequities and you've just described the perfect example. You don't really need individual examples like you say, it's just- it's so clear that there's so many different layers that are preventing people from getting the care that they so desperately need. So, thank you for bringing that up. Now, let's shift to the arts. How does accessibility in the arts affect BIPOC with disabilities? I'd love to hear some examples of ways in which you've personally have experienced a lack of access.

CO: So, it's one of those sort of like, walkthrough situations too because I think the first piece of what the biggest barrier is, is implicit bias, right? Because let's say you go the arts, the biggest thing that- so when we say is like, "oh, what if someone is loud? What if someone is anxious and looking around?" What if someone say like, is autistic and they're like verbally, you know, and outwardly showing their pleasure, which some people may say like "oh, be quiet" but that's their way of, you know, expressing that they're excited. There's, you know, the certain things like that. Well, here's the thing. . . You know, I used to have this conversation a lot with other folks in autistic communities cause I'm autistic and especially like, if I'm unmasking. So, right now I'm masking, which is a whole conversation but that- say if I'm in a meltdown, I cannot have a meltdown in the same way I could if I was say, a white cis man. Because if I had a meltdown as a white cis man, then people would just see me as "oh, this person is emotional" or "this person is upset" or-

CO: "this person is expressing themselves". If I'm emotional, then I'm a danger. I'm a threat, they should call 911. We have seen with some of the interaction that a third to a half of the people who the police do end up having fatal shootings with are disabled folks. And then there's a disproportionate number of black and brown folks. So, when you put it together, it doesn't help. I think because of that history, not because people are assuming that this is gonna happen but more times than not, people have already had experiences of this happening that they just don't feel comfortable entering into that space. So, I know that when I have work with arts organizations and non-profits in the past as a consultant, this is one of those areas where it's really important for non-profits to think about intersectionality and then combine it. Because they'll try to find ways for the arts to be accessible but just like with the Kimberlé Crenshaw example, they're thinking about how to make arts accessible for disabled folks with a default sort of stereotype or archetype they have in their head, being a white disabled person.

CO: And they wanna make the arts accessible for black, Indigenous people of color but they're thinking about it in terms of just their racial identity, not say a black Indigenous person of color who's also disabled. Especially with a- with the intellectual developmental cognitive or psychiatric disability. So, when those two things come together into a arts house, which had already has a culture of being highfalutin, being a little bit poised, being, you know, being the sort of refined. All those constructs, right? Then, someone comes in in the fullness of themselves and then it causes a problem.

CO: And then the things that are coming out before the fullness of the story, so like especially if it's invisible disability, they're not gonna be able to see that right away. What they're gonna see is a person of color-

CO: A BIPOC. . . in a space acting erratic or whatever those things are and I think it's, for me, I can share and I've heard this multiple times, it is the fear of being in a situation where you start to have- hear those terms and those labels put on you. You start to see the looks and the people feeling a little scared. That, to me, is a threat to my life, and it might sound. . . it might sound extreme but I think that as we are hearing more and more, especially about Elijah McClain, we are starting to see that being disabled and black and just living like, Elijah McClain. . . flapping to music because he was happy. . . well, you know-

CO: Trying to get food.

CO: That's a threat to my life. So, I think it's a bigger story that I think can be really encapsulated down to if I was to tell an organization like, free consulting tip, consider those ways in which, how is the organization creating a space that could hold someone at the fullness of an intersectionality? Not just intersectionality for who you're expecting or who has always come or who the status quo is, but an intersectionality of the people who are missing. What is being done to make sure this space is accessible for them?

ER: And it seems like with the pandemic, there's such an opportunity to start over, to rebuild and really get things right. I'm an optimistic person even though there's all this horrible stuff happening everywhere. I feel like. . . small steps, you know, to make things better. So, in terms of rebuilding and integrating accessibility within the organization, you talked a lot about welcoming, you know. Making the space welcoming to anybody with an invisible disability or anyone who's black and has a disability, there's a lot that needs to be done from the ground up. So, where do we start? What's the best place to start? If an arts organization is going to rebuild, knowing what you just said, where is a good place to start because it's so overwhelming to think of all the different places, you know, to begin. So, let's come up with some ideas for people.

CO: So, as you're sharing, you're an optimist. If there was a continuum between optimism and pessimism, I'm a little bit closer to that. And so [laughs] so, it means when I say I have a lot of-

ER: Pessimism! [laughs]

CO: I say I have a lot of hope without optimism.

ER: Okay, that's- yeah, that's more what I meant. [laughs]

CO: I have hope for the future but I'm not very optimistic about it. And the reason why I'm not is because there's a lot of sort of the solutions that people are considering that, to put it bluntly, if they would've worked, they would've worked by now. So, doing things like considering like, how we can be more inclusive, well this is something that we've been talking about since 504, right?

ER: Yeah, yeah.

CO: Like in the late '70's. You know, like you said the ADA-

ER: Yeah, yeah.

CO: is 30 years old this year.

ER: Yeah.

CO: It's obviously that approach isn't working. Obviously, you know, the incessant trainings are not working. Obviously, looking at this from a citizen's perspective without also looking within yourself to see why there's a bottleneck as an actor within the system. You have to be able to do that. I think we're in a space where people have historically, wanted to deflect any sort of real, individual, intrinsic onus in accountability for large systemic issues. I understand why, because we all wanna just be seen as individuals that are sort of innocent unless we can be proven to have done something directly. What I think the issue is, it is less like a pinball machine or a bowling alley, and more like a Rube Goldberg machine. While we may have hit one piece, we may not see what the end result but that doesn't mean we didn't have a part in it. So, I think what's difficult about this is that I don't think that we have done a lot, is start to take more of an eagle-eye view, kind of like playing the Sims. Taking that Sims-level view, of looking at ourselves as the active character in a world around us. Seeing how we impact that world, seeing how we navigate that world, seeing what it means for us to be in that world to other people. And I think that can start to help us to see inside of ourselves like, in our thoughts, in our beliefs, our core beliefs in particular. Start to get some of that subconscious thought out because I think that that's really gonna be the answer and I think part of that, as an asterisk for people to understand, is that it's going to be a lot of work.

CO: Because if we're going to accept that implicit bias or unconscious bias as part of the issue or core to the issue, then we also have to acknowledge that it's implicit and unconscious, which means if you're thinking about it, it's already too late. It's conscious bias.

CO: Is that the same? So, you're not gonna be able to sit there and ponder it. It's one of those things that you have to be very much, whether you wanna call it in tune, whether you wanna call it mindful, whether you wanna call it aligned, whatever that is, hypervigilant, whatever you wanna call it. Well, we have to start to track our impact and start to disrupt it from there cause we're not gonna just be able to sit and intellectualize it.

ER: Well, here's a perfect example. The ADA, as you mentioned, just turned 30, right? And I've been talking it up to many of my able-bodied friends and family and I asked them, did you know the ADA is turning 30? Did you know the history of the ADA? Do you know this person? Do you know that person? And nobody has a clue. And that to me, is that ableist view, right? It's that ableist- they don't have to pay attention to that because it doesn't apply to them and I think that-

ER: what we need to change is everything applies to us, regardless if you have a disability or if you're able-bodied. It applies to you and you have to start paying attention and you have to start speaking up and being an ally and acting like it matters because it's a societal thing. And one of the ways to break open those social constructs.

ER: So, disability activist Alice Wong, I know you've heard of her, says, "disability spans cultures and races. It's both visible and invisible, black and brown, disabled people still receive push back by white disabled people who do not want to acknowledge that racism and other forms of oppression exist. But, these incidents of racism and microaggressions wear us down. The ADA is important. The culture change, the real culture change takes much longer to achieve." What are your reactions to that?

CO: I feel like I can explain this to something people, to your point, are a little bit more familiar with, which is part of it, which is racism, right? So, race as a construct was created in Spain in the mid-1400's. That was when racism started. Racism also started in the form that we know it during what we have

been taught to be the European exploration, that's about the 1500's. The Civil Rights Act, which did not include disabled people by the way, was only passed 56 years ago? So, we're talking about a 600-year problem, at least that we can track, that we were trying to resolve in 56 years. And we had the Civil Rights Act, we can't go back to the Emancipation because we already knew that didn't work! That's why we had to have the Civil Rights Act. So, the ADA is one of those things. We had disabled people since when? And our current understanding of disability, as a valued judgement or a judgement of someone's ability to interact in the world as an "average person" was in quotes, has really only come around since capitalism.

CO: Capitalism was not always necessarily the form that we used for trading, we've always had trade and market and bartering but it wasn't always capitalistic. So, the reason why I'm saying this is because all of these things are constructed by society. Constructing means that we came together as a society either implicitly or explicitly, either really quickly or really slowly over time and decided that these are the ways we're gonna categorize and construct people. The issue is that these are two timelines that are intertwining and part of the issue with our society is that we have siloed the experiences of even those people that we amplify as the idols and the role models of what certain people are supposed to be. Like do you know Harriet Tubman was disabled? Did you know Sojourner Truth was disabled? Did you know W.E. Dubois was disabled? There's a lot of black people we have amplified in the racial justice movement, in the black justice movement that we don't even know as disabled. Audre Lorde was disabled, bell hooks was disabled.

CO: You know, we don't talk about it because we only want to focus on their race and yet when we think about disability like I said, like the sit-in, the people know that the Black Panthers created a meal train every day for that month? That they came in and they helped disabled folks? No, we don't hear about that. All we hear about the Black Panthers was that they were some violent supremacist group that tried to shoot people. So, to Alice Wong's point, I think goes back down to the piece around both intersectional erasure, which is when you wanna hyper focus on one part of someone's intersectionality at the erasure of others. And that could either be because it's malicious or it could be someone's way of saying like, the well-intentioned racist of like, "oh well, it's just, it was a lot to process in the moment and we're talking about race right now. So, I just wanted to focus on that." Yeah, but you are also parceling me as a person out, for your comfort. So, that's not going to help anything- [laughs]

ER: [laughs]

CO: That's not being an ally, that is being someone who is- being harmful and potentially violent in an ally's clothing. And I think this is what's important about people seeing how they are showing up and their impact in the world in a critical way that's gonna be painful. I'm not gonna sit here and say like, "oh yay, I'm hurting people". You know, I think it's harsh to hear because no one wants to hurt people. No one wants to have a negative impact but I don't wanna tell you, there are some people in my life that I still love dearly but they have hurt me to the core because they are saying things that I don't think that they- because it's not conscious. It's coming out and it's impacting in a way that in itself is not polished. I lived in Kentucky for 6 years. That sort of racism is polished! It is-

CO: packaged, it is delivered to you with a white glove service. When it comes out of your unconscious like that because you're not aware of it, it's rough, it's jagged. It's painful, it cuts.

CO: So, I think that is what's really important. . . relearn history is I think, the best way. Go back to like a high school or middle school public education textbook and every single one of those deemed for those concepts in those chapters, research it on your own.

CO: Cause you will learn that it's not the same.

ER: I just feel like there's so many great points that you're making and there's a part of me that's kind of cringing because I feel like I failed in so many ways to really take a good look at this discomfort because you mentioned that word. Discomfort is really what people are not willing to go deep into, the discomfort of feeling the feeling that you're talking about and acting upon them and being true to oneself because we are all complicit in this systemic racism that's going on in our country. And it goes back hundreds and hundreds of years. So, I see what you're saying when you kind of laugh at me saying "oh optimism, you know, give me a break", I get it. [laughs] But I feel like, you know, tiny steps. We have to- I'd rather make bigger steps, but I feel like the more we talk about this, the more we amplify these voices. Hopefully, there'd be some change. So, in closing, you've had a wonderful conversation. I wish I could talk to you all day but I wanna hear, can you share what you'll feel hopeful for? Cause you talked about hope, what are we making progress on? Or just anything you feel hopeful about.

CO: I feel like in terms of change from a societal lens, to reference Alice Wong's quote, it's not going to be comfortable. If you have looked at social change, if you wanna look at it historically, if you wanna look at the French Revolution, if you wanna look at the end of Apartheid, if you wanna look at, you know, Hong Kong right now-

CO: If you wanna look at, you know, all of these different sorts of things when there is a change, it's often very difficult and in- you know, it's just like the seed, right? We always wanna hold the seed in its fullness and its wholeness but in order for the seed to actually bring forth the plant, bring forth the flower, bring forth the fruit to grow, that seed has to break apart. The seed has to break apart and be reconstructed into something new, and that something new will create more seeds that hopefully will just continue to improve and to be stronger and to bear more fruit and have more fragrant flower. And what I have hope for is what I'm seeing right now in terms of the discourse that we're having, the insurrections we're having, is it scary? Yes. Are we in really turbulent times? Absolutely. If we wanna talk about "America, number one". The United States, going what, 275 years without a constitutional convention?

CO: That's historically, like wow and-

ER: [chuckles] Right.

CO: It's time. It's time.

ER: It's time.

CO: So, this is the time for the seed to open up in the grounds. . . in the darkness, right?

ER: Yes!

CO: And then we grow out of this, into the light and hopefully the plant and the flower and the fruit that comes out of this, will be that society that is equitable, that is going to be more inclusive, that's gonna be more proactive around these issues. The only thing that's stopping us is people who want to inhibit

our growth or things that wanna inhibit our growth. And I feel like to use this metaphor, if our soil is toxic, meaning our environment, we're not gonna be able to do anything because we will die at germination stage. If we have pestilence come in, hatred, nationalism, fascism, you know, ableism, eugenics through the pandemic, all these things. That is also going to stifle us right there at the tap root and if we don't take a look to where we're trying to go, where we're trying to reach, we don't have a vision of how do we get to the sunlight? There's no point in growth. So, I think it's important for us to see this, not as "oh, everything is terrible, everything is bad" but, yeah, we're in growing pains right now but that's the beauty of what it means to be in society with each other and to have that social change work.

CO: And so, I mean what I can say for folks who are super uncomfortable, especially if this is the first time, they're hearing about some of these things. What a reframe could be is that you may be feeling in your frustration, perhaps a misplaced empathy for the folks who've had to deal this all the time. If you have not been uncomfortable and now you are. . .

CO: it's like I really apologize because it sucks, and you know what? I know! [laughs] because there's people in their intersectionality that in my case, I've been living through this for 34 years.

CO: So, this is why it's important to have leadership of those who have impacted us well. So, that's what I would say is like, this is the time to grow into that- to that growing pain.

ER: Yes, ChrisTiana, you're amazing! Thank you so much, one last quick question. I wanna know because you are doing certain credible work and you are such an eloquent speaker; how do you keep yourself going? I mean, you jut go and go and go and you do these trainings and you have to um- amazing words that you write and speak. What keeps you going in the face of all of this?

CO: I have had several conversations, especially with other disabled BIPOC about this but I think just people who are living in these experiences and I think the difficulty back to that piece segment about the empathy or even experiencing some of the discomfort that people are feeling. There's a lot of folks, myself included, who feel like we don't have a choice. If there was any theme from people that I've spoken in these intersections, is that people just don't feel like they have a choice. It's like what- what else are you going to do? If you have found yourself in say, the middle of a wilderness where you have to survive, you can't just sit there and be like, "okay well, everything's fine. . . I can just saunter my way through and- and I'll come out the other side". No, you have to actively survive and protect yourself and try to fight for a situation where whether I may not experience it. I would love it for my kids and my grandkids to have to wade through as much bs as I had, to be blunt.

CO: And so, I think that aside from coffee and - You know, [laughs] I'm getting a puppy at the end of September so maybe, that'll be a way. But I think that the only thing that's really keeping me going is- is my ancestry and my future. My ancestors as Obeya, have been fighting against oppression since they were trafficked and stolen from Nigeria and brought to Jamaica. That's just my lineage and so there's a part of me that I feel obligated to continue the lineage of my family to fight against oppression as an Obeya. But also, I'm tired. I remember I first started telling my mom I was tired-

CO: Like at 8, 9, 10 years old and I'm not alone and being that young and already being like, "okay, I'm out, this is too much". So, what I don't wanna have is to have a child or a grandchild that by the time

they're 8, 9, or 10 years old, they've already. . . the world has already lost its salt. They should be able to enjoy life to the fullest as long as anyone else.

ER: As John Lewis said, keep making good trouble.

CO: Mm.

ER: So, keep fighting, keep on keeping up and get that puppy and keep drinking your coffee and we will see you do great things, right? So, thank you so much for your time and energy and I look forward to speaking with you more. Thank you.

CO: Bye! Thank you for having me!

Narrator: Opening Doors is produced by the Seattle Cultural Accessibility Consortium and Jack Straw Cultural Center. This podcast was made possible by The Awesome Foundation, Seattle Office of Arts and Culture, and individual contributors, with in-kind support from Jack Straw Cultural Center, Sound Theatre Company, Jennifer Rice Communications, and the SCAC steering committee. Music performed by William Chapman Nyaho, produced through the Jack Straw Artist Support Program. The mission of the Seattle Cultural Accessibility Consortium is to connect arts and cultural organizations with the information and resources to improve accessibility for people of all abilities. SCAC's fiscal sponsor is Shunpike. To learn more, go to seattlecac.org. Jack Straw Cultural Center, producer of the Blind Youth Audio Project since 1997, is committed to keeping art, culture, and heritage vital through sound. You can learn more at jackstraw.org.

We hope you enjoyed this first season of Opening Doors. Make sure to subscribe at soundcloud.com/OpeningDoorsPod, or wherever you get your podcasts, to hear new episodes as soon as they're released. Thanks for listening.