

An Analysis of Black Disability in Higher Education: A Canadian and Black Feminist Perspective

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Abstract

In Canada, institutions of higher education are deeply rooted in colonial systems of knowledge production, institutionalized racism, and Eurocentric academic traditions. Despite the dismantling of formal legal barriers, Black disabled students continue to be marginalized by the legacies of racism and ableism embedded in academic policies, prevailing attitudes, and institutional cultures. Though there has been significant research focused on understanding the specific barriers faced by disabled students in higher education, much research is still needed on the intersecting challenges encountered by Black disabled women. This paper critically evaluates the essay *Being Black and Disabled in University* (Métraux, 2023) which draws on a study from Joy Banks, & Michael S. Hughes (2013), and responds to it within a Canadian context, employing a Black feminist disability studies framework. By integrating statistics and findings from the report on *The Intersection of Blackness & Disability in Canada* (Anderson, 2020) alongside the theoretical insights of Black feminist scholars and disability scholars, this paper foregrounds the nuanced realities of Black disabled students in higher education and advocates for systemic change so that we may implement tangible strategies to better support their experiences and academic outcomes.

Keywords: *anti-racism in higher education, disability justice, Black feminist pedagogies, women & gender, DisCrit*

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Introduction

The Canadian educational system presents unique obstacles to Black disabled students due to their combined experience of anti-Black racism and ableism. Parekh (2023) states “less frequently discussed is how the perception of ability can be influenced by racism, classism, and other forms of discrimination” (p. 40). As such, I critically examine the essay *Being Black and Disabled in University* by Julia Métraux (2023) which draws on a study from Joy Banks & Michael S. Hughes (2013) and consider the study within a Canadian context. Through employing a Black feminist disability studies framework and integrating statistics and findings from the report on *The Intersection of Blackness & Disability in Canada* (Anderson, 2020), I attend to the nuanced realities of Black disabled students in higher education. Through exploring statistics alongside the theoretical insights of Black feminist and disability scholars, this paper advocates for systemic changes which will support the well-being and academic outcomes of Black disabled students.

Anti-Black Racism and Ableism in the Canadian Context

The report on *The Intersection of Blackness & Disability in Canada* (2020) shows that 21% of Black Canadians report disability status, whereas 19.7% of Canadians have reported the same status. According to Anderson (2020), Canadians with disabilities also had lower post-secondary degree attainment (13.2% vs. 20.7%) and were more likely not to complete high school (27.4%) due to systemic ableism and inaccessibility” (p. 1). Among the demographic of Black people with disabilities between 15 to 64 years old, labour force participation reaches 47% while their non-disabled peers maintain an employment rate of 74% (Anderson, 2020). Thus, Black disabled people experience extreme inequities regarding educational opportunities together with work position and healthcare access. These statistics indicate that systemic

exclusion affects education at higher levels since structural obstacles, together with cultural barriers, block Black disabled students from fully engaging in their academic journey and achieving success. Academic institutional exclusion intensifies for Black disabled students because they lack sufficient mentorship and advocacy from Black staff members. Basu (2021) states “Black people constitute 6% of university students in Canada but only 1.9% of faculty members. Indigenous people are 5% of the population but less than 1.5% of faculty members”. Given that the establishment of educational institutions occurred through colonial and white supremacist forces, these institutions have not successfully implemented solutions to these structural inequities. Basu (2021) states “BIPOC students often feel lost without mentors or role models with whom they can identify. If a student finds a teacher or mentor who looks like them it can have a great impact.” Thus, surface-level diversity programs and lack of representation in higher education can disproportionately affect Black disabled students.

Theoretical Framework: Intersectionality and Black Feminist Disability Studies

The complete evaluation of obstacles that Black disabled students experience demands using an intersectional approach. Crenshaw (1991) established intersectionality as the analysis method that illustrates multiple types of marginalization, creating distinct experiences of being among the least privileged. The intersection of Anti-Black racism and ableism makes Black disabled students face significant exclusion in educational spaces. For example, research has shown that racialized and disabled students are often perceived as less capable, less engaged, and less likely to succeed (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2017). Faculty attitudes also play a critical role in shaping academic experiences. Common experiences of Black disabled students include faculty questioning the legitimacy of disability accommodations. From my own experience as a Black disabled student, professors have assumed that we (Black students) require remedial support,

regardless of our academic performance and engage in discriminatory grading practices that penalize us (students) for non-normative communication styles or learning needs. As Baker (2024) states:

...the coloniality of power and social construction of normality are crucial factors in how Accessibility Services advisors respond to the needs of students with disabilities seeking services. The experiences of Black disabled students are indicative of the way normalcy and coloniality continue to shape educational institutions (Mignolo, 2012; Wynter, 2003).

Likewise, Parekh (2023) states “white spaces can also be dangerous in their circulation of ableism and disability discrimination. Notions of normalcy are not only inscribed through whiteness; they are then used to disable and discount the presence, contributions, and value of racialized students” (p.43). Thus, many Black students routinely experience repetitive racial microaggressions through encounters of being treated as unqualified before receiving accommodations and met with disbelief when asking for needed accommodations. Hence, disability must be examined through an intersectional approach to account for these nuances.

Racism and Exclusion

The report on *The Intersection of Blackness & Disability in Canada* (2020) reveals that Black students with disabilities face less respect from their academic environment than white students with disabilities. Thus, students will likely avoid asking for help and participate minimally in university activities. Eurocentric curriculum methods and teaching practices push away Black disabled students because they eliminate their significant historical roles from the educational record. According to Collins (2000), educational establishments tend to reinstate dominant cultural perspectives that exclude Black students' views. The combined marginalization of Black disabled students occurs because academic traditions fail to represent disabled voices

together with Black perspectives. When Black disabled students are absent from the curriculum, their academic experiences fail to find recognition within educational institutions.

In addition to faculty bias, university curriculum remains overwhelmingly Eurocentric and ableist. They prioritize White, Western knowledge systems, rigid, text-based learning models, and a focus on written assessments, which may not be accessible for students with disabilities. For Black disabled students, this means that they are not only underrepresented in classroom discussions but also excluded from academic content that reflect their histories, cultures, and Afrocentric ways of knowing (Dolmage, 2017; Boutte et al., 2021). Ahmed (2012) describes this as "institutional whiteness," a phenomenon where academic success is measured through white, able-bodied standards of knowledge production and intellectual engagement. These biases shape faculty-student interactions, classroom participation, and access to mentorship opportunities, further alienating Black disabled women from academic spaces.

Schalk (2018), and Moya Bailey (2019) push for disability studies to prioritize real-world experiences of people who have disabilities and are racialized and marginalized. Schalk (2018) criticizes established disability research frameworks because they ignore race along with other overlapping identities which limits their ability to reveal complete disability-based oppression. While there remain limitations to current research frameworks, the "matrix of domination" theory (Collins, 2000) enables researchers to examine institutional support for diverse oppression mechanisms. Higher education systems show discrimination against Black disabled students through insufficient infrastructure, Eurocentric teaching methods and inadequate support services that little benefit them.

Institutional Barriers and Accommodations

Despite legal mandates requiring universities to provide disability accommodations, many institutions fail to fully support disabled students, particularly those from racialized backgrounds. Key institutional barriers include bureaucratic delays, resistance to implementing accommodations, lack of funding for disability services, inconsistent accommodations across departments, and cultural stigma surrounding disability disclosure (Smith et al., 2021). This is particularly notable for Black students who may fear racialized stereotyping (Smith et al., 2021). As a result, Black disabled students frequently go without the accommodations they need. Additionally, Black disabled students navigate the psychologically and emotionally heavy weight of a racist and ableist institutional environments which is hostile to them. This often leads to racial battle fatigue, a term first explained by Smith et al. (2007) to describe chronic stress and burnout resulting from exposure to racial microaggressions and institutional discrimination. Mental health services are needed to support those students facing racial battle fatigue. Unfortunately, university's mental health services are not specifically culturally responsive, which can diminish the desire of these students to gain the appropriate accommodations. Common challenges include a lack of Black therapists, disabled counselors, Eurocentric therapy models that ignore racial trauma, rigid policies on mental health which reduce access to crisis intervention for disabled students (Simpkins, 2018). These institutional shortcomings can lead to heightened rates of anxiety, depression, and burnout for Black disabled students who are already at a disadvantage. Evidently, disability accommodations that have been adopted to display white, normative, middle-class orientations fail to recognize the specific requirements of Black disabled students.

The Economic Dimension: Class, Race, and Disability

Economic pressures create yet another major yet neglected obstacle. Black Canadians face a higher poverty rate than the rest of the Canadian population, as one-quarter of them live in low-income households, in contrast, only one-fifth of the general population does (Anderson, 2020). Black disabled students encounter increased difficulties in pursuing higher education because of their various economic positions. The report on *The Intersection of Blackness & Disability in Canada* (2020) states “The Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) reported that Ontarians with disabilities "have lower educational achievement levels, a higher unemployment rate, are more likely to have low-income status, and are less likely to live in adequate, affordable housing than people without disabilities” (p. 2). Many disabled students find it challenging to attend postsecondary due to the combination of postsecondary tuition expenses and adaptive technology purchase costs combined with inaccessible housing expenses. Thus, students from disadvantaged economic backgrounds face difficulties maintaining academic dedication because of their recurring financial challenges. Black disabled students need to maintain employment responsibilities to sustain themselves, which consumes their time away from academic duties and commitments. Anderson (2020) states “The CRPD acknowledges how the intersections of disability, race, and gender may amplify a person's experiences of discrimination and impact their socioeconomic outcomes” (p. 2). The financial pressure increases mental health issues because Black disabled people already suffer from stress from coping with multiple forms of discrimination. The absence of economic elements regarding Black disability within the essay *Being Black and Disabled in University* demonstrated a substantial deficiency in the understanding of educational equity research.

The piece *Being Black and Disabled in University* presents Black disabled students' ability to persevere and advocate for themselves as ways to confront institutional obstacles in an

American context. I contend that the way resilience showcases Black disabled students' strength presents a danger because it seems to endorse the trivial notion that personal determination can solve systematic disparities. According to hooks (1994), analyzing resilience leads institutions to shift focus from systemic changes because it makes marginalized individuals more responsible for survival than holding institutions accountable. According to this essay, Black disabled students survive their inaccessible educational environment by forming unofficial support groups. The availability of these networks proves essential, however, they must not function as alternatives to the organizational duty of academic institutions. The report on *The Intersection of Blackness & Disability in Canada* (Anderson, 2020) demonstrated that Black disabled people in Canada avoid disability services from institutions because they do not trust these organizations and worry about discrimination. Universities need to solve systemic issues by developing inclusive support systems that avoid forcing disabled students to guide themselves.

Conclusion

Black disabled students experience higher education through settings formed by the merging effects of racial discrimination, disability discrimination, and societal economic disparities. This critical discussion about Black disabled university students starts in the essay “Being Black and Disabled in University” but fails to represent the full complexity of their lived experiences. Black disabled students in Canada need comprehensive systemic changes from universities that draw their guidance from the report on *The Intersection of Blackness & Disability in Canada* (2020) and Black feminist scholarship above performative diversity initiatives. Higher educational institutions must boost their hiring of Black disabled faculty staff, administrators, and faculty because this can produce institutional policies that incorporate diverse perspectives. The new educational design requires implementing Black disability studies into the

curriculum to showcase the achievements of Black disabled people who need to find space against mainstream dominant stories (Collins, 2000). The accessibility services must expand their support to serve Black disabled students by employing staff competent in anti-racism and disability justice and establishing outreach programs directed at Black communities. These students require economic assistance through targeted scholarships and financial aid. Universities should work to obtain expanded funding for disability infrastructure. The establishment of safe places for Black disabled students to share their experiences while building community will emerge from mandatory anti-racism and disability justice training provided to all faculty, staff, and students. Higher education institutions must establish these systemic changes to effectively support Black disabled students while eliminating the combined burdens of oppression they face.

This analysis demonstrates the importance of Black feminist disability studies and the report on *The Intersection of Blackness & Disability in Canada* (Anderson, 2020) in the identification of Black disabled students' structural barriers and systemic change requirements. Lorde (1984) demonstrates that survival remains outside academic boundaries. Learning brings the ability to convert our distinctions into sources of power. Anderson (2020) states “The limited inclusion of Black people with disabilities and apparent gaps in services, programs, and policies demonstrate that the intersectionality of race, gender, and disability is a critical area for research, service, and collective action” (p. 1). The support of Black disabled students requires universities to adopt this mindset and recreate higher education through principles of equity, social justice, and complete inclusion.

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