

Nzinga Vaz

Prof. Julia Rodas

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Disability, Blackness, and, Denial

Aside from being born into a world of oppression and not being born with close to a third of the resources required to succeed in life, one has to consider the implications of when disability and race intersect. Black men and women are faced daily with having to perform accordingly in society, have a double consciousness, and try not to act or seem threatening in an effort to survive on a daily basis. With African Americans being an endangered species at the moment, I question is there a regimen for those who are Black and disabled? Do they have a way of pretending not to be Black and disabled as a resource for survival? Is “passing” an option? Is there an appropriated way that disabled individuals act and have to pretend to be? Is there a way to cover up ones disability and aren't they more at harm within society with such intersections?”

First and foremost to be a black disabled in America woman or man, your faced with double oppression. To be black means being faced with a decreased likelihood of survival. Because of the colors of our skin we are forced to live in poverty, attend failing schools, as well we experience discrimination on a daily basis. Were faced with the daily challenges of being stopped and killed by police during routine stops. We receive shitty medical care and we reside in inferior living conditions, we have longer prison rates and we have a shorter life expectancy due to the inescapable conditions that are foisted upon us.

I AM A BLACK DISABLED WOMAN or MAN! Let that resonate... To identify as such speaks volumes for many; unfortunately those voices of those who have been silenced. To say those very few words which essentially speaks socially the essence of who they are —not all of which they are, but this is the lens through which they navigate the world. To be black and to be disabled; often, these intersecting identities makes them twice as much of an outsider in society. African Americans are already looked at as criminals and treated as such; unfortunately as a culture disability has been one of the identities that we've tried to shy away from due to the fact that were already stigmatized. I often wonder; is discrimination and oppression is excused when it comes to those who are Black and disabled?

“A second piece of legislation, also named Avonte’s Law, was approved by the New York City Council in 2015, providing enhanced funding for schools to install automated alarm systems in special education classrooms. Sustained attention to disability is especially vital for critical projects that seek to account for the psychic and embodied dimensions of racism, understood as “the state-sanctioned production and exploitation of group vulnerabilities toward premature death” (Gilmore 247). Eric Garner’s dying words, “I can’t breathe,” recorded on a witness’s cellphone camera and rapidly distributed across social-media platforms, became a rallying cry for Black Lives Matter protests. Far from diminishing the rhetorical power the phrase has subsequently attained, remaining alert to its connection to Garner’s asthma places the violence of his death in a police chokehold within the context of an ongoing history of racial biopolitics that has operated by way of the long-term debilitation of the physical bodies and mental health of black populations in the U. S. and across the globe.³ A perspective on the relationship between race and disability would also situate spectacularized occasions of racist police violence along a continuum with the less visible, yet endemic, persistence of structural racism and its hold on the body. Analyzing the role of disability in the structural persistence of anti-black violence becomes especially urgent in connection with questions of mental, cognitive, psychiatric, and intellectual disability.” (Leon J. Hilton, Avonte’s Law p221)

In African American and West Indian cultures disability is something that is somewhat of an embarrassment to the family that causes shame. This shame associated with disability has become a key component in the hindrance of development of those who are disabled, which has become a leading cause in poverty within the disabled population as a whole. The embarrassment that comes with disability especially of those with physical impairments can often lead to children not going to school; not receiving the services that are needed for the child's diagnosis, and often some cases go undiagnosed when disability is measured on a scale of good to evil. The attitude of people around you, who say you do not belong, stems to make social outlasting acceptable. Cultural concepts that influence views of disability and illness stem from religious beliefs related to Christianity. There are major beliefs that have had impacts on the ways in which many West Indians families view disability: for example, disability is a punishment for something you did wrong in your past. These belief systems are deeply rooted in Jamaican cultural values and beliefs. They have played a major role in shaping the attitudes toward disability. They're tied to a firm belief that disability is a result of sin. In an effort to not be associated with disability, my family; without knowing would gaslight the shit out of my sister. Just to rid ourselves of the social stigma we told her that there was nothing wrong with her and that she was pretending. My mother would say that someone put voodoo on her and that's the reasons for her behavior. All of the behaviors were unexcused and we pretended to everyone that she didn't have a disability; for herself as a black woman; and for us as a black family, we needed not go further and add any more barriers that would hold us back further in life than where we already were. In this instance not only were we gaslighting, but "passing" as well. I've seen another case within an African American family where there were similar cases of denial of disability where the family lived in a housing complex and were scheduled to move. They were all packed and ready to move out and before leaving the apartment they put the family member who had Down syndrome inside of the refrigerator as a method of transporting him to the new apartment.

"Although I have been both black and disabled my entire life, for years I lied to myself about

being disabled. I could appreciate the pride that accompanied the black experience, the historic and perpetual triumphs and tragedies that inspire the progress of a people. But disability was different. Disability was a curse much worse than the curse of Ham, and instead of accepting it I fled into a lie of being someone I could never be and should have never wanted to be. I became a victim of an able-bodied orthodoxy, one memorialized into my memory, derived from the seeds of my lived experiences and the veil of myths through which those experiences are strained. I believe we all succumb to societal orthodoxies in some way, because the procurement of favor demands it and it allows us to live without troublesome confusion. But for many of us, orthodoxies become a memorial, a shine at which we pray and to which we cling, all the while privately acknowledging that the shrine is not of our making, not to our liking and that it segregates and kills us very casually, very privately and very slowly. This photo helped free me from my denial.” (Blackness, Disability, and Denial)

When it comes to the criminalization of those who are Black, disabled, and imprisoned the denial is even more extreme. As I mentioned earlier African Americans already have it hard enough just being born black. To be black means to be born with a stigma. However, society focuses on the word “criminal” and does not invest enough time or interest on the bigger issues that lead to the individuals criminal behavior which led to incarceration. 60% of the inmate population has some form of a learning disability, which excludes other existing disabilities whether it is apparent or non-apparent. The struggles that inmates face on a daily basis vary, however, they share the common experience of having the disability either undiagnosed or ignored. Many cases we see inmates being reprimanded and disciplined for inappropriate behavior and not following rules and regulations of the facility. Most of the time their physical or cognitive impairment are not taken into consideration and unfair punishment is served. This sheds light on the school to prison pipeline due to reasons like: while attending school their disabilities

went unnoticed or diagnosed incorrectly; leading to further issues and arrests in life. If we really put some focus on this: the inmate population is made up a large amount of African-Americans who are left to navigate the world with a known or unknown impairment whether it is physical or cognitive. Prisoners with physical disabilities are one of the most vulnerable populations in the prison system, however; nationwide they are subjected to neglect, denied services, and placed in the box (solitary confinement) for reasons many wont believe or accept.

The experience of disability is different for members of the Black community. From birth, many African Americans are born into a world which does not make all resources available for them to flourish and succeed in life as it is. With there being so many systematic setbacks being black should be considered a disability from the standpoint of society being quick to call out disability in our communities while continuously failing to acknowledge that they are clearly responsible for the very environments that created such large numbers of disability. What this is that we see here is institutional racism where in which they'll try to cut off the communities resources so that disability in these communities are silenced or even hard recognized at all. This is the main reason why lets say for instance mental illness, is at an all time high an amongst those of color. When African Americans are diagnosed with schizophrenia we're diagnosed at much higher rates and are also given antipsychotic medications more frequently and in higher doses than that of a white patient. Our aggressions are micromanaged by white people who at times often don't understand where the aggression comes from and the and given assessments based off of racial stereotypes and biases of the patient. And this inadequate social structure that you see here demonstrates the outcomes of the care that we receive.

Many of our Black disabled teens usually have to experience the situations like the School-to-Prison pipeline where they are put on a path that will result in them dropping out of school, getting

involved in crime-related activities, and later being incarcerated for the acts they performed all due to undiagnosed disabilities.

Poor living conditions, like public housing; where the levels of lead are constantly tested annually so that there's lead but not enough at this point to cause severe brain damage as it has done to many. These instances become more of life-style expectancy rather than a lifestyle that can be avoided all together if blacks were provided with the proper resources to treat diagnosis's that are being confused with behavioral problems. *"We probably wouldn't last very long, anyway. These days, most DGDs make it to forty, at least. But then, most of them don't have two DGD parents. As bright as Alan was, he might not get into medical school because of his double inheritance. No one would tell him his bad genes were keeping him out, of course, but we both knew what his chances were. Better to train doctors who were likely to live long enough to put their training to use."* (*The Evening and the Morning and the Night*)

When you're white and have a diagnosed mental illness; they're given support groups, therapy, counseling, family services, counseling for their children to cope with what that white person is going through. If you're Black and have a mental disability, you're forced to apply for disability, you cannot get employment while receiving disability (state laws not mine), your children are torn away from you, you lose your apartment, and the money that's given from disability is counted as an income so you cannot pay is for adequate care to manage your condition. Blackness, disability, manifests in deep social and economic inequalities, and has taken root in the historic shortcomings of disability in this country. It should not come as a surprise that certain school districts in this country receive less funding and the majority of the students that live there are the minority, with the majority being black. Poor resources and a lower level of education, improperly maintained buildings, are just some of the short comings of those who identify as black and disabled.

In closing I ask: Is being black in the United States today a disability altogether? Now when asking this question you may want to process it from a standpoint of racial designation and what being black was designed to be. If we take into consideration the reasons why racial categories are created, you'd know that they were created to give privilege to some and disadvantage others. This reflects the accuracy of the black experience and its racial designation, being designed to be disabling. This has been and will continue to be a system devised to limit opportunity, participation, and achievement, and it continues to do so in many areas of our lives.

Works Cited

1. *A. Rahman Ford. Blackness, Disability, and Denial*
2. *Leon J. Hilton. Avonte's Law*
3. *The Evening and the Morning and the Night. Octavia E. Butler. Source: Callaloo, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Spring, 1991), pp. 477-49*