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Blackness and Disability and How Disability is Too Often Forgotten

Abstract

Disability is commonly left out of discussions on intersectional oppression, and this omission and stigmatization of disability does us all a disservice. Black people are more likely to be disabled due to the continuous violence of racism, and black people and disabled people in their status as “other” often find themselves needing to prove their worth in a society that does not see their lives as unconditionally valuable. We cannot see the full picture on issues of oppression such as racism and sexism without considering disability.

Keywords

disability, Emmett Till, feminism, intersectionality, police brutality

Disciplines

Africana Studies | Disability Studies | Women's Studies

Comments

Written for AFS 250: Black Feminism in Film & Hip Hop

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Blackness and Disability, and how disability is too often forgotten.

Most Americans, I would hope, have heard of Emmett Till- the black boy brutally murdered in 1955 for allegedly wolf whistling at a white woman. Till's story illustrates how the common sense argument that a boy should not be killed for wolf whistling at a woman goes out the window when the boy is black and the woman is white. However, there is an important piece of the story that is consistently left out: as a result of polio, Till often stuttered, and when he was having trouble speaking, he would whistle to relax and help control his breathing.¹ This shifts the story- instead of being murdered for something that deserved only a simple reprimand, it's quite likely that Till was murdered because one of his harmless coping strategies was assumed to be rude. Racism contributed to the assumption that a black boy was being rude and racism is the only possible reason why anyone could have fathomed that he deserved to die, but the erasure of misunderstandings related to disability allows for them to keep happening, and they are most fatal for black people and other people of color. The stigmatization of disability that keeps it in the shadows does us all a disservice because we cannot see the full picture on other issues of oppression such as racism and sexism without considering disability.

¹ Bell, Christopher, *Blackness and Disability: Critical Examinations and Cultural Interventions*, (Michigan State University Press, 2011), pg 2,
Till-Mobley, Mamie and Christopher Benson, *Death of Innocence: The Story of the Hate Crime That Changed America*, (The Random House Publishing Group, 2003), pg 89.

In 1989, Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality” to refer to the specific oppression black women face on account of being black and women. One of the examples she cited was a large company brought to court for its discriminatory hiring practices in almost never hiring black women, but the company defended itself by pointing out that because they hired black men and white women, they couldn’t be accused of discriminating against black women. Intersectionality argues that black women, on account of being both black and women, face oppression at the intersection of those two things.² The way that disability interacts with blackness and womanhood is often slightly different, because disability is much more easily made invisible and completely erased from the narrative. As this essay discusses, racism’s continuous violence, both literal and psychological, takes a toll on black people, and so mental health issues often abound in black communities. Women’s pain and symptoms are regularly ignored and dismissed by doctors, and this goes double for black women, which makes it much harder for them to receive care for any illness or disability. It’s widely documented that black people are hit especially hard by police brutality, but not as well known that between a third and fifth of all victims of police brutality are disabled,³ and many of the black people murdered by police are also disabled. The role disability has played in the lives of many famous black people such as Harriet Tubman and Audre Lorde is also regularly ignored, which further deprives disabled black people of representation. Black women’s bodies and disabled bodies have also

² Crenshaw, Kimberlé, *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*, (University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1989).

³ “Media Coverage of Law Enforcement Use of Force and Disability,” Ruderman Foundation, Ruderman Family Foundation, Accessed May 7, 2020, https://rudermanfoundation.org/white_papers/media-coverage-of-law-enforcement-use-of-force-and-disability/.

consistently been othered and objectified, and black people and disabled people in their status as “other” often find themselves needing to prove their worth in a society that does not see their lives as unconditionally valuable.

Because they are already constantly discriminated against for their race, disabled black people have good reason to want to keep quiet about their disabilities. There is a strong stigma against talking about mental health and disability, which may be in part due to the fact that many marginalized communities are already stereotyped as being physically flawed, intellectually inferior, and irrational or psychologically unstable, and disability brings another layer of similar negative connotations.⁴ Tropes like the “strong black woman” that set up the expectation that black women are able to endure any pain and abuse and survive anything without help because of their innate strength make it even harder to admit to disability or discuss it as an issue.⁵ There is perhaps at times a subconscious perception of being disabled as a failure, as proving the negative stereotypes of inferiority correct, when of course this isn’t the case at all. Disabilities, whether genetic or acquired later in life or both, do not make one inferior, and this truth can co-exist with the fact that black people should not have to deal with disabilities and/or mental health issues resulting from racist violence.

⁴ Bell, *Blackness and Disability*, pg 9,

Perry, David, “Police Killings: the Price of Being Disabled and Black in America,” *The Guardian*, June 22, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jun/22/police-killings-disabled-black-people-mental-illness>.

⁵ Bailey, Moya and Izetta Autumn Mobley, *Work In The Intersections: A Black Feminist Disability Framework*, *From Gender & Society*, February 2019, pg 21.

There is also a glaring issue in that a black person and a white person with the same condition or illness can have a very different prognosis. For instance, a 2012 study found that the death rate for treatable health conditions among black Americans was twice that of white Americans due to poverty and lack of health insurance.⁶ Even when considering the medical model of disability, which proposes that a person's disability is simply a medical problem they have that needs to be treated, statistics like these show a vast social inequity. If someone can afford medical care, another barrier to actually receiving adequate care is doctors' bigotry. There is often disbelief by the general public and by doctors that young people can be disabled, and their pain is not taken seriously. Women's pain is also dismissed, and it is dismissed doubly for black women. Taking this into account, it often takes much longer for black women to be treated for any illness or diagnosed with any chronic condition, because the white, male dominated field of doctors simply do not listen to them. Because of this, even if black women do have the financial means to seek medical assistance, their care is likely to be of a lower quality, and any health problems they have will likely have a much greater negative affect than if a white man sought treatment for the same condition.

These observations lead to the social model of disability, which is the idea that the real issue or truly disabling factor is the lack of accessibility in society. This model focuses on the fact that a wheelchair user's life would be a lot easier if their home and all public spaces had the

⁶ Riley, Pamela, Susan Hayes, and Jamie Ryan, "Closing the Equity Gap in Health Care for Black Americans," Commonwealth Fund, July 15, 2016, <https://www.commonwealthfund.org/blog/2016/closing-equity-gap-health-care-black-americans>.

ramps and elevators and other things necessary so that said wheelchair user could access them.⁷

The social model also proposes that a mentally ill person's quality of life would be vastly improved by less societal stigma, more easily accessible mental health resources and better societal understanding so that mentally ill people's lives are not at risk due to assumptions that they are dangerous. While the medical model sees a mental illness as an issue that is purely the mentally ill person's responsibility to deal with, the social model sees how the rest of the world greatly exacerbates struggles with mental health. However, even conversations about disability that consider the social model still often fail to have an intersectional approach and do not consider the experiences of disabled women and people of color. The problem is exacerbated by the continual erasure of the existence of disabled people of color, in life and in death.

Disability has been erased from many reports of disabled black people being murdered, not just Emmett Till's. Till's case is just one example that stands out strongly because the circumstances surrounding his death are otherwise extremely well-documented. In the case of James Byrd, who was killed in 1998, there was no whistle to cause a misunderstanding. Byrd's murderers likely saw a black man who had noticeable difficulty walking due to his severe arthritis and decided that he was a prime target. Only the initial reports on his death included that Byrd was disabled; all subsequent reports and articles omitted this fact.⁸ This problem continues- while it was estimated in a 2016 study that between a third and a half of all people killed by

⁷ Bailey, *Work in the Intersections: A Black Feminist Disability Framework*, pg 28.

⁸ Bell, *Blackness and Disability*, pg 2-3.

police and law enforcement officers are disabled, news reports on victims of police violence usually leave out this important detail.⁹ Commonly affected are neurodivergent, mentally ill, and deaf people who are behaving in ways the police deem unusual or do not react to the police's orders quickly enough or in the way that the police expect, and so they are assumed to be dangerous and killed.¹⁰

However, activism speaking up about police violence against disabled people is often centered around the white individuals affected.¹¹ This is despite the fact that due to increased poverty rates, exposure to violence, and other discriminatory factors related to racism, BIPOC (Black and Indigenous people of color) in particular are more likely to be disabled than white people.¹²

It's not just in news stories about their deaths that black people's disabilities have been erased. For instance, at the age of 15 when she was still enslaved, Harriet Tubman was struck over the head with a weight and thereafter suffered from periods of dizziness and sleeping seizures. As Chris Bell writes in *Blackness and Disability: Critical Examinations and Cultural Interventions*,

⁹ "Media Coverage of Law Enforcement Use of Force and Disability," Ruderman Foundation.

¹⁰ Kineavy, Frank, "Police Violence Against People With Disabilities Continues," DiversityInc, January 11, 2019, <https://www.diversityinc.com/police-brutality-people-with-disabilities/>.

¹¹ Brown, Lydia, "Undoing Racism & Anti-Blackness in Disability Justice," April 14, 2015, <https://www.autistichoya.com/2015/04/undoing-racism-anti-blackness-in.html>.

¹² Kim, Euree. "More Trainings Are Not the Answer to Police Violence Against Disabled People," Truthout, February 4, 2020, <https://truthout.org/articles/more-trainings-are-not-the-answer-to-police-violence-against-disabled-people/>.

“Read one way, this description underscores the systematic violence overseers inflicted on slaves (a raced perspective). From another perspective, this description is premised on male domination of women (a gender perspective). A disability perspective (re)positions Tubman's instantaneous disabling alongside of her subsequent actions of attaining her own freedom and then returning to the South on numerous trips to liberate other slaves. Such daring action would be unremittingly dangerous for any individual; only if we factor in Tubman's bouts of illness, our understanding of her actions as well as her corporeality become fully accurate.”¹³

Too often reporting on tragedies only discusses the number of deaths, not those injured or otherwise permanently affected. This does those who survived but with scars a disservice.

Audre Lorde is often quoted as saying that “There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives.”¹⁴ The nuance of her struggle is well documented in terms of race, gender, sexuality, and class, but disability in terms of her legal blindness and experience with cancer are not discussed as often.

Lorde takes a stance against the idea of the normative body with her refusal to use a prosthesis for the breast she lost to cancer, as discussed in her *Cancer Journals*.¹⁵ A rejection like

¹³ Bell, *Blackness and Disability*, pg 1-2.

¹⁴ Lorde, Audre, *Sister outsider*, (New York, NY: Ten Speed Press, 1984), pg 138.

¹⁵ Bell, *Blackness and Disability*, pg 54

this one of standards related to an ideal or normative body cannot be separated from blackness because of how black bodies and black women's bodies in particular have been exoticized and othered, so it's important to hear perspectives like this one coming from black women.

Lorde also talks about how watching the 1983 film *Terms of Endearment* in which a young mother is dying of breast cancer strengthened her "resolve to talk about (her) experiences with cancer as a Black woman." This is because the high standard of living portrayed in the film was unquestioned and taken for granted, and everyone in the film was white.¹⁶ A white-centric portrayal of illness is not universal and should not be treated as such.

These examples go to show that an important piece of the whole picture of these black people's lives is being consistently left out, which makes it impossible to have a complete understanding of the oppression they have struggled against. Leaving disability out of the narrative only exacerbates the stigma, misunderstandings, and lack of awareness already running rampant that makes disabled people's lives much harder than they need to be. Omitting disability from the past also deprives disabled people today of role models and representation, of which they already have precious little. Black women already have to contend with mainstream media being painfully whitewashed and male, and disabled black women have yet another aspect of their identity that is conveniently nowhere to be found.

¹⁶ Ibid.

A lack of representation is also othering in that it means that many people in the majority find someone being disabled to be surprising and often make a big deal out of it and ask a lot of questions. White people already do not respect black women (Ex. white women asking if they can touch a black woman's hair)¹⁷ so this is often an even more trying issue for black women because people have no respect for their boundaries.

As touched upon with the discussion of Audre Lorde, disability is also another way by which the standard, normative body is challenged. Able-bodied cis*¹⁸ white male bodies are often seen as the default, and other bodies are scrutinized, questioned, and objectified. There are infinite possibilities for what a disabled person's body could look like, and people need to be more open-minded in their thinking so that every visible disability doesn't throw them for a loop and lead to often curious but invasive attention bestowed upon the disabled person in question.

People living outside what is considered the "norm" consistently have to prove their worth to those that are in the majority. For instance, after it became apparent that Emmett Till had a stutter, his mother, Mamie Till-Mobley, homeschooled him on reading various books and documents they would be reading in school, so that he would have a starting base of knowledge and be able to get through the reading much more fluidly, without stuttering.¹⁹ Till's mother didn't want anyone to assume her son was stupid and look down on him. Her actions are logical,

¹⁷ Porter, Lauren, "8 Microaggressions Most #BlackWomenAtWork Have Experienced At Least Once," *Essence*, March 29, 2017, <https://www.essence.com/lifestyle/black-women-work-twitter-trend-microaggressions-race/>.

¹⁸ *cisgender, meaning not transgender

¹⁹ Till-Mobley, *Death of Innocence*, pg 89

understandable, and born out of love, but it should not be necessary for anyone to have to prove their intelligence or worth.

We live in a society that constantly asks some of us to prove our worth, over and over again, while others, by virtue of birthright, are automatically proven to be worthy. One of the ways many are forced to prove their worth is by working for basic needs. With the way things are now, those with money and power can choose to work or not as they please, and those who are struggling have no choice. Disability activism challenges the notion that people have to be productive workers in order for their lives to be worthwhile. The notion that productivity is desirable for everyone is commonly held, although at times it is unclear what exactly is meant by “productivity.” Certainly, in the eyes of those Americans who were handed wealth, power, and capital in abundance, it means working a job that fuels the economy and therefore benefits those already wealthy with a lot of money invested in the economic machine. The concepts of productivity and work as necessities to sustain basic needs are only ever going to benefit those in power and keep those in poverty in poverty.

One of the stereotypes of black women is that they are “welfare queens” who are lazy and unproductive and are leeching off of taxpayers’ money. The truth is, families on public assistance or welfare spend half as much on average as those who are not receiving assistance,

and often welfare does not even provide the bare minimum, as evidenced by all the people who can't afford healthcare.²⁰

Disability benefits also often do not even provide the bare minimum, as evidenced by all the online resources for attempting to make ends meet while on benefits.²¹ A program like Social Security Disability Benefits require applicants to have worked five out of the last ten years, with some exceptions, while a program without this requirement, supplemental security income disability (SSI), pays much less.²² Many disabled individuals also have to make the difficult decision between getting married or keeping their disability benefits, because depending on the benefit program, they won't qualify for benefits if their spouses' income is too high, even if their spouse doesn't actually make enough to provide for both of them. Furthermore, if two people receiving disability benefits get married, there is usually a "marriage penalty" where the combined total they are allowed to receive is reduced.²³

All of these stipulations prove that assistance is being given very begrudgingly, without respect for people's inherent worth. Instead, the world needs more unconditional love and care for people on account of them being people. Jennifer Nash's article on black feminist love-

²⁰ Weissmann, Jordan, "This Chart Blows Up the Myth of the Welfare Queen," *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, (December 17, 2013), <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2013/12/this-chart-blows-up-the-myth-of-the-welfare-queen/282452/>.

²¹ "How to Make Ends Meet on Social Security Disability Benefits," *Disability Benefits Help*, (November 9, 2010), <https://www.disability-benefits-help.org/blog/how-make-ends-meet-social-security-disability-benefits>.

²² "What If I Do Not Have Enough Work Credits For Social Security Disability Benefits?" *Social Security Disability Resource Center*, Accessed May 9, 2020, <https://www.ssdrc.com/11-6.html>.

²³ Wilcenski, Edward, and Laurie Hanson, "What Happens When Persons Living with Disabilities Marry?" *Special Needs Alliance*, (June 2010), <https://www.specialneedsalliance.org/the-voice/what-happens-when-persons-living-with-disabilities-marry-2/>.

politics, *Practicing Love: Black Feminism, Love-Politics, and Post-Intersectionality*, discusses how too often activism related to intersectionality between othered, minority identities focuses on shared pain and suffering. Nash suggests that while pointing out the suffering is important, love-politics reminds us of the importance of self-love amidst this suffering and asks for a shared, communal vision of all the possibilities for a better future.²⁴ This vision for the future will not be complete without the silence around disability being lifted. Too often ableism*²⁵ is only considered by itself, if it is considered at all, and its role in further oppressing those already affected by racism, sexism, and classism, to name a few, is ignored.

²⁴ Nash, Jennifer C, "Practicing Love: Black Feminism, Love-Politics, and Post-Intersectionality," *Meridians* 1 (March 2013); 11 (2): 1–24. doi: <https://doi.org/10.2979/meridians.11.2.1>.

²⁵ *discrimination against disabled people

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