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Laissez-faire Ableism in the Academy Contouring the Map with Graduate Student Perspectives

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Abstract

Graduate studies present unique contexts for accommodation due to the factors such as student age, professional background, and employment status within the university. Scholars recognize the need to reframe the dominant narrative which positions dis/ability in relation to ability, or ableism. The present study uses graduate student experiences with self-advocacy to examine Laissez-faire ableism at interactional and personal levels of higher education. We argue that dis/ability accommodation should be viewed as an iterative and interactive process between the student, faculty, and other institutional actors such as Dis/ability Services. The authors are doctoral students in education with hidden dis/abilities who are racialized differently. This article values dis/abled student voice as essential to the equity and inclusion for dis/abled students (Pearson, 2015). We use Black Feminism in Qualitative Inquiry (BFQI) and duoethnography to empirically investigate our ongoing attempt to transform our institutional climate. Our purpose is to highlight the centrality of humanity in the pursuit of dis/ability justice by putting our lived experiences becoming coconspirators in conversation with each other.



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Graduate educational spaces are uniquely challenging contexts for dis/ability accommodation due to factors such as student age, professional background, and employment status within the university.¹ Relatedly, scholars recognize the need to reframe the dominant narrative which positions dis/ability in relation to ability, or ableism (Campbell, 2009; Annamma, Connor & Ferri, 2013). Ableism refers to the cultural norms of dehumanizing individuals with dis/abilities, treating them as broken and dysfunctional, not only on an interpersonal level, but systematically through law, policies and practices (Campbell, 2009). Ableism allows society to assume there is a “normal” way of being, living, doing, and fundamentally, existing, as one goes about the tasks of daily life (Keller & Galgay, 2010). Privileging a “lens of ableism” over that of a lived experience with dis/ability can result in students internalizing ableism (Hehir, 2002; Gillborn, 2015). In this paper we locate the problem of ableism through the exploration of lived experience to alleviate that possibility.

As doctoral students with dis/abilities who have earned master's degrees, we have observed laissez-faire ableism by various actors within the academy, including (but not limited to) faculty, staff, conference presenters, and peers. Laissez-faire ableism refers to attitudes, behaviors, and policies that blame dis/abled individuals for the challenges and characteristics that separate them from their non-dis/abled peers. It is different from ableism writ-large because it relies on the neoliberal ideology to assuage guilt that should be owned by the enforcer of dominant ways of knowing and being, perpetuated in particular through the normalization of whiteness and able-bodiedness in and outside of the academy². Based on our experiences, we infer that faculty and staff view dis/ability accommodations as a burdensome federal requirement that undermines their productivity.

Positionality in Connection with Theory

Since we claim different racial identities (Xhey as Black and Emily as white), we understand that a student’s perceived ethnoracial social category can be a protective factor against racism experienced by students with dis/abilities (Annamma et al., 2013). At their core, both racism and ableism dehumanize in order to subjugate bodies that are determined to be Lesser Others (Erevelles, 2011). It does not seem to matter if these differences are real or constructed- the power dynamic is entrenched and reinforced (Annama et al., 2013). Intersectionality is an analytical tool equipped to make multiple and simultaneous oppressions legible to the reader

¹ We use the term dis/ability instead of disability to trouble the social construction of a false binary between those who are “able” and those who are not (Connor et al., 2016; Goodley, 2014). We use the traditional spelling when referring to official laws, organizations, and publications.

² We are intentionally using a lower-case “w” for whiteness in order to decenter this ideology (See Stewart & Nicolazzo, 2018).

(Crenshaw 1989; Crenshaw, 1991; Cooper, 2015). Intersectionality is also a tool capable of analyzing oppression and privilege at the same time (Cooper, 2015).

DisCrit prioritizes intersectional ontology and seeks to highlight the voices of minoritized students and considers the interaction between the individual and their historical, socioeconomic, political, and cultural environment, particularly as they pertain to notions of dis/ability and education (Annamma, et al., 2013; Connor et al., 2016; Crenshaw, 1993; Annama et al. (2013) complicate the interdependence of racism and ableism; specifically, the authors posit that the educational experiences of Black and Brown students are fundamentally different than those of their white peers with the same dis/abilities (Connor et al., 2016). According to DisCrit, intersectionality is an essential tool for humanizing students with dis/abilities, especially those who are multiply minoritized (Hernández-Saca & Cannon, 2019).³ Scholars also note that critical, intersectional approaches to dis/ability have the power to liberate students from educational contexts that isolate oppressions and identities without troubling the lived experience holistically (Peña et al., 2016).

When we consider our project within a DisCrit lens, we recognize that the intimate and symbiotic relationship between ableism, racism, and further oppressions (e.g. transphobia) can exacerbate psychosocial manifestations of systemic oppression, further pathologizing us into an internalized subhuman status that can manifest as “imposter syndrome”, an experience we reject for its simultaneously ableist and racist axiology (Annamma et al., 2013). Imposter syndrome commonly refers to the unfounded inferiority complex one might develop due to the internalization of oppression one experiences (Dancy, 2014). A psychological construct, imposter syndrome has multiple valences including the feeling of being a fake or having an unearned spot, thinking one is present due to luck rather than merit, or habitually diminishing one’s own success (Dancy, 2014).

For Xhey, this construct becomes real in the moments where internalized messages of exceptionalism coupled with doubts of their competency lead them to believe they are in a doctoral program to fill a quota rather than for the learning experience outright. When their imposter syndrome is challenged by knowing peers or mentors, Xhey often doubles down on their self-doubt pointing to the many ways in which the institution profits from their Black, dis/abled and trans* body, wondering, if not for this mutually beneficial relationship between unicorn and university, would they not simply replace them with another “diverse” peer? For Emily, impostor syndrome relates to her presence and persistence in a PhD program, and feeling as though the academe views dis/ability as an individual problem or worse, as a sign of incompetence. For both authors, imposter syndrome manifests as internalized disposability and fear that the university will act upon their power to dispose of them if their dis/abilities prove to be too complicated to accommodate. Laissez-faire ableism is evidenced in both of their experiences as they internalize a structural oppression into a personal inadequacy. Moreover, early researchers investigating this construct in high achieving women have described themselves as amazed at the self-perpetuating nature of the phenomenon, further undergirding our laissez-faire characterization (Clance & Imes, 1978).

Imposter syndrome can have an outcome of racial battle fatigue, having a *disabling* effect on students by legitimizing a racist way of being in the academy in its reliance on normalized conceptions of what counts as success; students can be othered by an institutional culture and

³ In the context of dis/ability, multiply minoritized refers to individuals with dis/abilities that belong to another minoritized group, usually race, gender or sexuality (Erevelles, 2011).

climate that shares a hegemonic understanding of normal success (Dancy, 2014; Museus & Harris, 2010). In the case of students with dis/abilities, the impact is all the more ostracizing and omnipresent because there is a documented reason for the student to be considered lesser than their peers. Overcoming imposter syndrome as a student with a documented dis/ability can be tenuous as we quite literally negotiate allowances on academic work our peers do not have access to, however necessary.

We seek to reframe dis/ability accommodations as an *iterative and interactive negotiation process* between the student and faculty (or staff) that is supported by institutional actors such as dis/ability services offices. The present study centers graduate students' lived experiences with self-advocacy within an examination of laissez-faire ableism at interactional and personal levels of higher education (Kimball, Moore, Vaccaro, Troiano & Newman, 2016).

We use Black Feminism in Qualitative Inquiry (BFQI) and duoethnography to empirically investigate our ongoing attempt to transform our institutional climate (Evans-Winters, 2019; Sawyer & Norris, 2013). This article values student voice as essential to equity and justice for students with dis/abilities as we center the analysis on our education as doctoral students in the educational arts and sciences with hidden dis/abilities (Pearson, 2015). Our purpose is to highlight the centrality of humanity in the pursuit of dis/ability justice by putting our lived experiences in conversation with each other. Moreover, we call attention to the nuanced multiplicity of living with ableism in the academy as graduate students in the educational arts and sciences. The centrality of our humanity will shine through as our radically different ways of moving in the world make more apparent the similarities in navigating dis/ability in higher education.

The Lens of Ableism: Reframing the Dominant Narrative of Higher Education and Dis/ability

Despite the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) three decades ago, dis/ability studies are underrepresented in higher education research literature, particularly of the empirical type. Dis/abled students represent more than 10% of students enrolled in higher education institutions of all types yet are the subject of only 1% of peer-reviewed articles (Peña, 2014). This lack of research perpetuates an institutional culture of ableism in higher education that furthers microaggressive norms capable of undermining persistence (Museus & Harris, 2010).

Ableism is especially rampant in educational spaces, particularly in higher education institutions where standards of ensuring access to schooling in primary and secondary education are inconsistent with the mechanisms available in postsecondary institutions (e.g. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973; Dolmage, 2017). As a form of oppression, ableism can metamorphosize into nuanced ways of undermining students' learning (Linton, 1998). Adding in the human error that can occur when faculty members are charged with ensuring equity in the classroom, structures that do not offer specific guidance in graduate education make it all the more difficult to accomplish course objectives when the onus falls upon the student to assert their rights rather than being granted them outright (Dolmage, 2017).

Hibbs and Pothier (2006) analyzed the dis/ability accommodations process at one Canadian university and found that students noted a lack of flexibility with regard to negotiating equity (inclusivity from professors and other university actors once the proper paperwork was in place with the dis/ability office) and described a hostile environment that did not accept the changing nature of dis/ability over time and space (Hibbs & Pothier, 2006). Relatedly, Pearson and

Boskovich (2019) used autoethnography to complicate understandings of dis/ability disclosure in higher education and shift the emotional, logistical, and structural burden away from the students and toward a model of shared accountability. They describe a “forced intimacy that occurs when dis/abled bodies are expected (or even demanded) to share personal information with able-bodied people in order to have basic and safe access” (Pearson and Boskovich, 2019, p. 5). Viewed in this way, the continuous process of dis/ability disclosure serves to further dis/able and compartmentalize students’ dis/ability identities.

In addition to presenting the perspectives of two graduate students with hidden dis/abilities, this paper addresses one specific form of ableism: Laissez-faire ableism. Laissez-faire ableism draws its epistemological roots from notions of laissez-faire racism which blames Black people in the United States for the “black-white gap in socioeconomic standing, and resistance to meaningful policy efforts to ameliorate U.S. racist social conditions and institutions” (Bobo, Kluegel, & Smith, 1997). Positioning Black Americans as “architects of their own disadvantaged status” provides for guilt-free notions of whiteness and collective responsibility (Bobo, Kluegel, & Smith, 1997). Unlike other forms of ableism, laissez-faire ableism allows those in power to justify their attitudes by using the use of accommodations to reframe difference as deficit. This is due to laissez-faire ableism ultimately being grounded in neoliberal ideology that shares its worldview with meritocracy, which we understand to be the belief that our society rewards talent despite the clear evidence that power shapes who has access to the benefit of the doubt to be assumed as competent.

Process as Analytic Procedure

The destination of the present journey is to frame our dis/ability justice work as *trickle-up high-impact practices* (TUHIPs; Stewart & Nicolazzo, 2018). Stewart and Nicolazzo (2018) describe TUHIPs as a departure from the whiteness ideology of High Impact Practices (HIPs) that are “a strategy for recognizing the central importance of working alongside multiply marginalized populations in higher education praxis as well as a process through which educators can redistribute human and financial resources toward those who are most vulnerable” (p. 138). A central assumption of this work is [*whiteness*] (Stewart & Nicolazzo, 2018, 135; brackets in original)⁴ as an ideological container that allows multiple, interconnected systems of oppression to operate within postsecondary institutions (Stewart & Nicolazzo, 2018). Stewart and Nicolazzo (2018)

use [*whiteness*] as an overarching episteme that supersedes and encompasses a vast network of systems of oppression... [it] is a complex and nefarious web of tacit assumptions that, among other things, promotes an idealized vision of “the student body” or the “traditional” student that is limited to those who are white cisgender-heterosexual men, 18–23 years old, middle to upper-class, enabled, and (Protestant) Christian (p. 135).

⁴ “Our use of brackets follows their grammatical usage to replace a word or term within a direct quotation with another term that is synonymous and comprises the ideas behind the original word. In relation to our conceptualization, we use [*whiteness*] as an overarching episteme that supersedes and encompasses a vast network of systems of oppression. Thus, [*whiteness*] acts as a broad and all-encompassing descriptor for the many individual systems of oppression named above, as well as intersectional analyses of oppression (e.g., trans-misogyny, transmisognoir).” (Stewart & Nicolazzo, 2018, 135)

The present context brings ableism, specifically laissez-faire ableism, to the foreground in this understanding of whiteness as a container because ableism and whiteness work together to make existing as a graduate student in education more difficult for Xhey. Here, we center a lens of ableism to bifurcate our understanding of intersectionality manifesting in our differential experiences with accommodation in the classroom (Campbell, 2009).

Our data begins with Xhey's experiences because we are deliberately privileging their narrative living under racism on top of ableism. We share a humanizing vision for the academy so we have decided to frame this as an axiologically Black feminist project that understands black feminism specifically through the epistemological stance of Black Feminist Thought (Hill Collins, 1990). Hill Collins (1990) quotes Anna Julia Cooper, bell hooks, and finally Pauli Murray, noted trans* Black feminist activist for their emphasis on human solidarity, when she defines Black feminism as "a process of self-conscious struggle that empowers women and men to actualize a humanist vision of community" (p. 39). In this paper we are together engaging in a self-conscious struggle through the duoethnography that provides us with space to actualize our humanist vision through the work inspired by our writing together, some of which we will discuss herein.

It is with this humanizing vision of student life at the forefront of our analysis that we craft our methodology to produce the most liberating project possible as we act in allyship with one another. We are very cautiously playing in the dark with Xhey's data in tandem with Emily's knowing that using BFQI is a practice that must be taken up by those with the lived experience to do so (Evans-Winters, 2019; Morrison, 2007). At this point in our lives as academic researchers, we do not feel comfortable with proclaiming this as *only* Black feminism in qualitative inquiry because one of us, Emily, is racialized as white. Today we are drafting a living document upon which we will continue to grow our research and practice agendas as coconspirators in anti-ableist and anti-racist work (Love, 2019). Looking to the recent shift in language in organizing spaces from a search for allies to a search for coconspirators, through the work we do here and describe below we each are working toward becoming coconspirators because when we speak of [whiteness] we put it in brackets. We adopt the concept of coconspirators from Love (2019) and consider our coconspiring to be an act of solidarity that addresses our dis/abilities in relation to many systems of oppression and privilege we occupy as womxn, non-Christians, third generation graduate students, in addition to our races and dis/abilities. Drafting this manuscript was an exercise through the steps enumerated by Allies for Change, not the least of which is "social change work is always rooted in collaboration, humility and accountability." (Love, 2019, 118)

In addition to BFQI, we borrow from duoethnography knowing its limitations as currently imagined (Norris, Sawyer & Lund, 2016). We are not picking up the master's tools, but rather we are forging our own after observing the master's use of his (Lorde, 1984). We agree with the productive potential of the third space whilst rejecting any reliance on othering as a site of knowledge production (Norris & Sawyer, 2016).

Despite claims of mutual benefits, Norris and Sawyer (2016) lack a deep enough analysis of power in their methodology. Because we begin our analysis with using intersectionality as an analytical tool, we learn from, take from, and leave behind what will not and cannot work for collective liberatory goals (Crenshaw, 1991). First on this list of what to leave behind is the delegation of one of us as "the Other." In this work we engage each other as we engage ourselves, never succumbing to the external pressures of imposter syndrome, racial battle fatigue, laissez-faire ableism or the like to cast an oppositional gaze upon one another.

With this in mind, we seek to create a dynamic dialogic space grounded in critical listening (Kinloch & San Pedro, 2013). We engage in the dialogic spiral as a way of building trust and making meaning around our experiences with ableism in the academy and acknowledge our individual as well as shared vulnerabilities (Kinloch & San Pedro, 2013). We position our narratives in active conversation with one another, thereby moving beyond duoethnographic methods that allow narratives to “rest in juxtaposition” (Norris & Sawyer, 2016). The knowledge we put forth in this paper is simultaneously raw, polished, and non-linear. Our vulnerability and honesty with one another throughout the writing process reveal a dialogic space that is both original and hundreds of years old.

Black Feminist Duoethnography

First and foremost, this is an exercise of Black feminism qualitative inquiry (BFQI) (Evans-Winters, 2019). This project locates the problem in [whiteness] by focusing on how ableism manifests differently in the lives of womxn who are similar in dis/ability but different in race, and further ways (Stewart & Nicolazzo, 2018). We use the term womxn popularized by the staff at the UCLA Womxn’s Center because one of the further ways we differ is by gender, with Emily identifying as a cisgender woman and Xhey identifying as a nonbinary trans*gender person (Lou, 2018). Race is a categorical prism through which the dis/abilities we live with split into shades of ableism that has material consequences for our progression toward completion of our doctoral studies. We name this work as Black feminist first because [whiteness] permeates any scientific encounter (Evans-Winters, 2019; Stewart & Nicolazzo, 2018). It is through naming the white supremacy inherent to the practice of “science” that we challenge its conception of what is research is and what counts as new knowledge worthy of dissemination to the academic public (Patel, 2015).

It is only *after* we foreground Black womxn’s ontoepistemological stance that we also engage this work as a duoethnography because it is from that “third space” of our dialogue that we forge a new set of knowledges that could only be created through this particular kind of dialogical relationship building and praxis of allyship with and for one another. This project began as a class assignment, but has grown into a friendship built on the solidarity of being able to recognize each other’s plight with ableism in the academy. We take our cue from Ii and Jose-Chen (2019) who together grounded their duoethnographic exploration of co-mentoring as women of color in *trust* built from a decade of friendship. We recognize ourselves basing our dialogic inquiry in trust we are building as and because we are conducting this study. Importantly, Ii and Jose-Chen (2019) set their duoethnography in a theoretical framework of intersectionality espoused by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989; 1991; 2014). Unlike Ii and Jose-Chen, this is not a solely womxn of color authored project; therefore intersectionality as an analytical tool is all the more key as we tease apart the role of power in the conflicting ways we have experienced ableism in the academy. Together, we demonstrate the strength of cross-cultural multifaceted movement building in solidarity with oppressed groups who can together combat ableism from the unique vantage point of building love for one another that can be a practice of freedom (hooks, 1994).

Dis/coveries

Addressing Our Lived Experiences with Hidden Dis/abilities

The narrative excerpts below are selections from introductions written for a “Know Your Rights and Resources” event we hosted to fulfill our social justice project requirement for the Social Justice in Higher Education Settings class we took during the Fall semester of 2018. The excerpts are followed by our conversation sparked by our experience. In a way, November 7th, 2018 serves as a time-stamp for our own individual dis/ability awareness as graduate students. By engaging in critical listening we dynamically reflect upon and analyze our lived experiences as students with hidden dis/abilities.

Xhey. Hidden dis/abilities are stigmatizing... in the wake of a Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder-inducing terrorist attack I was not alone in feeling that I couldn’t miss class. I can’t speak for anyone else, but I feel the stigma prevented me from contacting my professors right then to say I was exercising my Disability Resource Services-registered right to take leave from class. Stigma can and does get in the way of exercising rights and accessing resources. (Xhey, November 7th, 2018)

Emily. I struggle every single day. I hate how I feel on Adderall. Most people think that Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder is about bouncing off walls and not being able to sit still. This may be true, but it is really about internal chaos. It is lonely and frustrating. Colloquial language about dyslexia tends to obscure the foggy reality of sense-making. I have been ignored, silenced, minimized or left to my own devices to navigate my academic experience. (Emily, November 7th, 2018).

Xhey. This excerpt refers to my apprehension to use an excused absence when a terrorist attack in my city triggered my Post-traumatic stress disorder. You see, I suffer from Racial Battle Fatigue. After years of living while Black at a flagship university in the south, ethnoracial terrorism elicits an autonomic response from my body. In my former life as an anti-racist organizer in the south, Jewish communal space had been the safe space where I found solitude between protests. This incident dragged me deeper into the fog of psychosis I’d be experiencing since my first time witnessing a neo-confederate Klu Klux Klan & Ko rally on a college campus. I moved into Moishe House after getting discharged from my near semester-long hospitalization resulting from my first psychotic break after Racial Battle Fatigue dis/abled me from taking care of myself. Despite how numb I felt from the tangent of panic this attack inspired in me, Emily was the only person I reached out to that day. This attack wasn’t about me. Black feminist foundation of human solidarity expects us to practice allyship in these moments.

Emily. I find that I am constantly ‘taking stock’ of my academic accommodations and filling in the gaps with experimental coping strategies. Some days I appreciate that my dis/abilities are hidden, and others it feels like there is a burden of belief that is weighing on me. Like somehow it is my job to make others understand, accept, and uphold the Americans with Disabilities Act. Though my dis/abilities are hidden, most of my apparent identities are those of privilege. I am a Jewish, middle class, cisgender female with white privilege. However much I can understand, expose, disrupt, and fight, I don’t experience racialization as a person of color. I have lived a life of privilege in many ways, without racial battle fatigue, without feeling devalued as a consequence of my race (Dancy, 2014).

Xhey. [Whiteness] is a container you can't escape (Stewart & Nicolazzo 2018). An escape room where there's no one waiting to take you home to safety once you *Get Out* because there's no escaping reality. I couldn't explain to any of my professors that I was losing my grip of reality due to trauma flooding my mind with wave after wave of dissociative episodes... You can't really negotiate terms of your release from a class when you have no idea of how unwell you might be the next week of class. Sometimes my Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder isn't disabling. Sometimes it's just inconvenient background noise, a constant state of fear of losing my mind. That's when anxiety is more salient than panic. It manifests as hypervigilance. Being that I have Bipolar Disorder on top of this, a manic episode is sometimes only one bad panic attack away. And when I learned I was on the Autism Spectrum after another stay in the hospital it became over whelming. I feel like I am THAT student always challenging whether professors read diversity and inclusion emails. Like, no one is gonna believe I have all these things and remember to use my pronouns at the same time. If I do disclose the details of my diagnoses I genuinely fear that someone will think my gender identity is a symptom of all of this rather than a fact since I came out at the same time as being diagnosed. So sometimes I just hide behind what more legible, Anxiety and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, to avoid disclosing everything and losing the confidence of faculty and staff. The narcissistic gaze of whiteness is enough to drive many people crazy. But I actually am. And frankly, I have to certify with the University to have access to the same schooling opportunities as everyone else. They make me disable myself before I'm permitted to learn.

Emily. As a student with multiple hidden learning dis/abilities, I consider a day successful when I am aware of my struggles and my needs and am working to address them. Sometime this alone takes all day, and it requires support from others. When I was diagnosed with my dis/abilities, I was provided with a prognosis: associates degree is the best option. College will be a struggle. I know that I am a doctoral student with dis/abilities *and* a strong student and researcher. Still, it takes daily work to remind myself and others that I reject the notion my dis/ability must be framed in relation to the abilities of others. Further, situating my work within critical spaces has allowed me to (begin to) understand how I have internalized white privilege as much as I have internalized ableism. For example, it would be hypocritical of me not to contextualize my experience within the DisCrit framework. My journey in postsecondary education is a factor of my ethnoracial identity, dis/ability, and socioeconomic status. How can I disrupt structures that my experiences until this point, however innocent or indirect, have helped maintain? This article is an important beginning to seeing and acknowledging refractions of the racial prism that must not be ignored when exploring dis/abled students' lived experiences.

Addressing Laissez-Faire Ableism in the Academy

What follows is an excerpt from a successful grant proposal that we wrote as a result of our "Know Your Rights" project entitled "Students Pursuing (Invisible) Dis/ability Justice through Intervention, Investigation, and Innovation."⁵ The excerpt describes two planned "intervention" activities.

⁵ The name of the project has since been changed to "Students Pursuing (Hidden) Dis/ability Justice" so as to maintain support for our allies who are visually-impaired.

PEP Workshops

Personalized Education Plan (PEP) workshops will provide space for students to reflect on previous schooling and plan for current and future workloads. Facilitated by the principal investigators, students will be able to brainstorm what alternative assignments would best suit their goals for a divine semester. They can do this with help from each other or on their own in a low-distraction setting of folks who understand the purpose of the innovation space. Lessons learned from this workshop space will be compiled into a compendium of alternative learning products and activities that faculty can access.

Student-Facilitated Faculty Feedback Workshops

The workshops will be an opportunity to anonymously share feedback from the compendium created by students with dis/abilities with faculty members teaching graduate coursework. Targeting faculty teaching the core curriculum (e.g. research methods) and those whose classes build upon each other (e.g. comparative education and comparative higher education). By de-siloing the curriculum design process faculty can share best practices and establish community norms on the rigor of curricular alternatives to maintain the competitiveness of our programs with peer institutions.

Xhey. For those of us with backgrounds of trauma, our success can hinge upon faculty literacy in trauma-informed care. I don't always mean this in reference to faculty being trained in mental health first aid, though that too. I mean I need humanizing faculty. Humans in faculty roles who feel compassion for our inability to predict the future, mood or otherwise... insecurity and instability.

Emily. Your response made me think about how compassion and rigor are sometimes positioned in opposition to one another. Such is the legacy of patriarchy, white supremacy, and ableism. I think the crux of laissez-faire ableism is that it finds a home for blame; the dis/abled individual further internalizes her dis/ability as her own problem, and she becomes aware of what she lacks. Laissez-faire ableism enables actors within the academy to shirk responsibility that might be shared: the "dis" becomes a more static "not." This is what I think of when I think about addressing laissez-faire ableism by humanizing. It's not just about individuals. It's about shaping a culture that supports differently-abled individuals and acknowledges dis/ability as but one face of the prism. We are naming and claiming our right to exist, resist, and persist, and our experiences are not the same.

Xhey. Laissez-faire ableism is the obvious curriculum of doctoral degree programs. There is nothing hidden about lateness penalties listed alongside a university approved dis/ability statement in a syllabus. Ableism is not a hidden curriculum when assignments are prescribed to all without room for negotiation. The canonical method of delivering graduate curriculum and our accepted ways of demonstrating success within it are fundamentally inflexible and lack the agility to embrace students through a design that does not universally disable those who are indeed the exception to the rule, by that syllabi's own admission. This is why we need to imagine otherwise what doctoral competency looks like. If, as they say, more people are scared to give a eulogy than be in a casket, why is oral presentation the norm of academic conference proceedings and dissertation defenses? Is 12-15 minutes really enough to explain an entire phenomenon, let alone the study of it? Did anyone ever communicate the entirety of what they wanted to say within the

confines of a page or word limit? Can we ever do a phenomenon, wicked problem, or scientific investigation justice by limiting it to a word processor? I think not. I believe the academic system is breaking us, just the way it was intended to. None of us is free until all of us are free. So here and together we reimagine what our education could look like free from the ableism that constricts it. Those of us who are differently and uniquely abled, are always caught up in the etcetera of “race, gender, class...” This is undeniably true of those of us with hidden dis/abilities.

Emily. I’m hopeful that the workshops will create space for imagination and collective responsibility to address the stigma associated with hidden dis/abilities. Previous research has shown that faculty are more likely to have negative attitudes toward students with hidden dis/abilities (such as learning and mental health dis/abilities) as compared with students with physical dis/abilities (Sniatecki, Perry, & Snell, 2015). One of the goals of the workshops is to expand the audience for conversations about dis/ability justice and awareness beyond dis/ability service offices. If dis/ability is about “becoming” as Erevelles (2011) states, then dis/ability might be retheorized as a “desiring machine” (p.50). Quoting others, she points out that desiring machines do not lack anything. According to this logic, we (dis/abled individuals) are exactly how we are meant to be, free from exploitation.

Xhey. This grant is an example of a “trickle up high-impact practice” or TUHIP (Stewart & Nicolazzo, 2018). Stewart and Nicolazzo (2018) note that “. . .our imagining TUHIPs is a strategy for recognizing the central importance of working alongside multiply marginalized populations in higher education praxis as well as a process through which educators can redistribute human and financial resources toward those who are most vulnerable.” (p. 137-138). The grant took this call for working alongside the multiply marginalized a step further because we, the multiply marginalized, conceived of this intervention on our own. (Ostiguy, 2018) Ultimately, we won the grant because they saw value in it. Thus, we have commodified ourselves- but it’s for a radical purpose.

Graduate Students’ Lived Experiences and the Need to Reframe the Hidden Dis/ability Narrative

Our postsecondary educational experiences thus far have given us the general impression that faculty may be apathetic, unclear, and sometimes resentful of their responsibility to work with dis/abled students. We are fortunate to have a strong community of support via key faculty and administrators. However, we recognize that these individuals are exceptional; they seek to improve dis/ability justice by removing barriers to inclusivity that remain within our school. However, (we hope that) this is only the beginning of a climate shift that requires a far deeper intervention to institutional culture in order to be sustainable. Our discussion builds upon that of Hibbs and Pothier (2006) and Pearson and Boskovich (2019) who posit that universities need to go beyond what is mandated by law in order to serve dis/abled students.

In the context of laissez-faire ableism, institutional climate transformation can be a barrier unto itself because frustration with accommodation becomes about passing blame rather than challenging entire communities to take responsibility for the learning of every student (Museus and Harris, 2010). Though we actively fight pressure to self-blame when common accommodations are neither enough nor appropriate for the graduate context, we still struggle to innovate new ways of demonstrating learning through academic products that higher education institutions value.

In order to address laissez-faire ableism, institutional actors must critically examine the notion of responsibility in the context of educating students with dis/abilities. Previous research has shown that academic departments view support for students with dis/abilities to be the responsibility of dis/ability services offices; consequently, academic departments may be reluctant to recognize the active role departmental actors play in ensuring equity and access for students with dis/abilities (Riddell, Tinklin, & Wilson, 2005). Institutional actors have the power to reduce the stigma associated with dis/ability by facilitating dialogue about dis/ability that identifies faculty and administrators as instrumental support and success agents (Myers, Lindburg, & Nied, 2014).

As individuals with hidden dis/abilities, we recognize that the ability to hide our status can be understood as a privilege in comparison to the hypervisibility of dis/abilities beyond our lived experiences. Here, we argue that this ability to pass is precisely what makes us vulnerable. Though at times we may seek camouflage to protect us from bias we've learned to anticipate, more often (if not always), assumptions made of us rest upon a belief that graduate students are homogeneously grouped. Assuming that students with hidden dis/abilities have a rational choice to make about passing for "normal" is problematic. The choice is not to pass or not to pass, the choice is to retain privacy or open ourselves up to the whole slew of biases, assumptions and discriminations that more precise knowledge about the exact nature of our dis/abilities make us vulnerable to. Caught between this proverbial rock and hard place, the forced response (not choice) is between which type and severity of ableism we prepare ourselves to deal with. This is not to say that every faculty member will always be ableist when given the information. It is to say that all people have bias and the potential to commit harm through the impact of their actions regardless of intent.

Like Erevelles (2011), our analysis challenges notions of dis/ability as an impairment, dis/ability as a container, and dis/ability as a lack, among others. The experiences and sentiments described above reveal our distinct, yet shared understandings of how our dis/abilities make us academically vulnerable and isolated. Our conversations also highlight ways in which we feel that laissez-faire ableism has been institutionalized at the interactional level of the graduate student experience. Thus far, our friendship and collaboration on grant activities has validated these sentiments and galvanized our desire to deconstruct practices that enable laissez-faire ableism to persist.

Moreover, Asch (2017) asserts that a truly welcoming society addresses environments instead of impairments (Asch, 2017). However, as demonstrated in Adams and Erevelles (2016), the process of navigating between dis/ability and the environment can result in the racialization and dis/abling of the bodies of students of color when power structures are grounded in white ableist ways of being. In the context of our experiences as graduate students with hidden dis/abilities, this means that while Xhey and Emily both contend with ableism in its various forms, Xhey is simultaneously subjected to [whiteness] as a container for other forms of oppression (Stewart & Nicolazzo, 2018). This is evident in the way we reflect on our current educational experiences: Xhey has been hospitalized twice since the Know Your Rights event. They struggle to determine what the least restrictive environment looks like at 30 years old when coursework is over but there are still papers to be written. The shame of being hospitalized twice in one year leads to questioning whether they're cut out for graduate school, thus imposter syndrome is threatening their very livelihood. Emily has had to advocate for herself through formal intervention so that her accommodations would not be used against her during her coursework. She describes

a range of emotions concerning her dis/ability identity, including the shame and privilege of hidden dis/ability, fear of being misunderstood and accepted, anxiety related to disclosure, the pressure to be faux able, and the implications of her educational journey as a white woman with dis/abilities.

This exercise in Black feminism in qualitative inquiry is not without its limits. There are obvious limits to how far Black feminism in qualitative inquiry can authentically speak to our joint collaboration when one of us is not a person of color. These limits are more than simply theoretical; they are imbued within our relations with one another, the way we share our experiences with ableism, and the way the world sees us. We recognize this and move forward cautiously, knowing that there is something problematic about putting white experience in conversation with Black experience *again*. This is not about having an experimental group and a control group. Ultimately, this prism of race we look through and see through differently brings to light new colors, tastes, and dance steps for the process of meaning-making through collaborative inquiry. Black feminisms as analytical tools (intersectionality) and methodological processes (Black feminism in qualitative inquiry) provided an opportunity for us to engage one another on the basis of our shared understanding of Black Feminist Thought as being defined by a belief in humanity (Hill Collins, 1990). Our collaboration demonstrates our ontoepistemological stance that the Black feminist praxis of human solidarity can be made legible through the illustrative example of witnessing each other grappling with ableism differently as it collides with racism in the academy.

Concluding Thoughts

The goal of this paper is to move toward an understanding of *laissez-faire* ableism in order to demonstrate the need for alternative accommodations and an *interactive negotiation process* for graduate students. Research that considers only those accommodations prescribed by clinicians (extended time, prescription medication, preferential seating, etc.) perpetuates the dominant ableist narrative (Weis, Dean & Osborne, 2014). Such research should instead look to include dis/abled student voices and engage university actors at all levels in conversations about equity and inclusion for dis/abled students (Pearson, 2015). Accommodating dis/abled students, particularly those with hidden dis/abilities, without forcing us to assimilate to neurotypical and normalized ways of being should involve actors at all levels of the institution. Only then can dis/ability justice be pursued with a genuine possibility of success.

As a form of oppression, ableism can metamorphosize into nuanced ways of undermining students' learning (Annama et al., 2013). Adding in the human error that can occur when faculty members are charged with ensuring equity in the classroom, structures that do not offer specific guidance in graduate education makes it all the more difficult to accomplish course objectives when the onus falls upon the student to assert their rights rather than being granted them outright (Dolmage, 2017). Within the geopolitical space of graduate school, dis/ability demands our attention lest we succumb to the dangers of not disclosing.

From this experience with coconspiracy we have learned the definition of steadfastness (Dillard, 2017; 2018). That is, our graduate educations are inextricably linked now as we concurrently develop our own understandings of what Dillard calls for, "a strong oppositional stance against hatred and betrayal, a revolutionary stance. At its center is the absolute requirement to affirm and deeply love Black life, wisdom, and culture" (p. 982). While this call is directly to Xhey as a Black person, bearing witness and being part of a fruitful collaboration that tears down institutionalized and interpersonal forms of ableism by grounding a sense of humanity in the

experience of loving Blackness allows Emily to learn from Dillard’s (2017) directive that “Now is the time to live that being out loud.” (983) Together and separately, we learned from this project to live out loud as our full selves. For Xhey, this meant developing a relational sense of humanity alongside the already developing independent sense of what an Endarkened Feminist Epistemological stance means for their work. For Emily, this involves diving deeper into DisCrit and Critical Dis/ability Theory in order to complicate the experiences of students with dis/abilities in higher education. This shared understanding of resilience through the Black and Endarkened Feminisms have fed back into our independent research agendas. Xhey used this confidence to pursue autoethnography, performance, science fiction, and mixed media to create a living mosaic that daughters herself through the dissertation journey (Dawkins-Law, 2019; Dawkins-Law Evans-El, 2019; Evans-Winters, 2019). Emily’s research uses critical quantitative methods to investigate dis/ability in higher education. Her resilience involves reliance, for she relies on emotional, instrumental, and academic support in order to accomplish these research goals. Together as leaders in our community in our student government we have worked to ensure questions about ableism are included in the upcoming school climate survey and we plan to invite speakers we cited here to campus to speak at our Personalized Education workshops that were funded as a result of our pursuing internal funding for our movement building (University of Pittsburgh, n.d.).

We hope that this collaboration serves as a marker of disruption, empowerment, and co-conspiracy against a form of ableism that is legitimized within the very academe that we hope will accept us. Moreover, we recognize that our experiences as students with dis/abilities are not the same, though they are instructive to one another and to others. This document represents the culmination of two colleagues becoming friends across four semesters, one seminar, a group project, a funded grant, an accepted abstract, and many more direct actions furthering the anti-ableist cause at our university and in our School of Education. We resisted our own demise every time we looked past our internalized ableism in the form of imposter syndrome and kept working on this project together despite challenges inherent in cross-racial, cross-dis/ability collaboration. We hope our integrated maturation over this project can serve as one more example of courage, hope, and resilience in the face of adversity proving fruitful for graduate students’ careers and lives independently and collectively.

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