

“Blackness Distorts:” A Qualitative Exploration of Race and Disability in Black Women Graduate Students

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Abstract

Few qualitative studies have focused on the experiences of neurodivergent graduate students as they pursue graduate and professional degrees, and particularly, how Black women make sense of their race, gender, and ability while preparing for academic careers. This study provides clarity on how their multiply marginalized identities lead them to make meaning of dis/ability culture, dis/ability identity, and expectations of academic performance and excellence despite experiencing executive functioning challenges. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 Black women graduate students, with special attention to race and dis/ability. Participants lived with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism, dyslexia, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), and auditory processing disorder. Participants shared the cultural norms and cultural stigmas among the African Diaspora as they relate to dis/ability and described how they sought refuge with other neurodivergent Black women. The article concludes with implications for research and practice, including more programming and pathways for (future) dis/abled faculty and more community spaces focusing on intersectionality.

Keywords: disability, black women, graduate students, ADHD, neurodivergence

Introduction

The increasing diversity of the graduate student population enrolling in higher education is a universal win for institutions and graduate education. However, the pursuit of graduate education provides its own challenges for dis/abled graduate students (Calarco, 2020; Carter et al., 2017). Challenges are expected and can be developmental in graduate education. However, these challenges multiply at the nexus of race, gender, and dis/ability. For graduate students who are racialized and gendered as minoritized, living with “invisible” dis/abilities and neurodivergent conditions can make graduate school even more daunting (Carter et al., 2017; Dwyer et al., 2023). The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of neurodivergent Black women in graduate school living with obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism, auditory processing disorder, and dyslexia, as their race, gender, and dis/ability collide. Race as an identity intersects with how one makes sense of dis/ability identity and culture.

The present study interrogates Black women graduate students’ experiences of “invisible” dis/abilities with consideration to their other salient identities while mirroring the history of community-building within Black feminism and its legacy (Porter et al., 2022). By assessing Black women graduate students racialized, academic, and personal experiences with graduate school, higher education, dis/ability culture, and dis/ability identity, this study gains a deeper understanding of the experiences of Black women graduate students who experience dis/ability and neurodivergence overwhelmingly. Their unique challenges point to further inquiry about the implications of graduate school programs of study and higher education, with the implications of academic ableism (Dolmage, 2017), and how disability leans toward being raced and gendered as White and masculine (Grech, 2015; Lovelace et al., 2021; Stapleton & James, 2020). As a result, this study asks, where is there respite for this student population, many of whom desire to have academic and professoriate careers? In the execution and reflection of this research study, I aim to shed light on

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the geographies of space and place (within academic institutions) and the self-advocacy these students employ on a regular basis in harmful academic settings. My study contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of racialized students with dis/abilities and neurodivergence in graduate school, and can inform policies and practices to support them appropriately (Moriña et al., 2020).

Race and disability shape the academic lives of Black women in higher education (Chapple et al., 2021). The intersectionality of identities remains complex; race and dis/ability as identities collide repeatedly in ways that have implications for both inclusion efforts and the ways exclusion thrives (Peña et al., 2016; Scheef et al., 2020). Representation in dis/ability culture and communities leans heavily toward White and masculine (Bell, 2006). When one's identities diverge from Whiteness and masculinity, as those of the Black women in this study do, to place oneself inside of academic spaces is to embrace the possibility of isolation, erasure, marginalization, and misunderstanding (Dolmage, 2017). Graduate school and academia in general are domains that perpetuates escalating conceptualizations of excellence, intelligence, and faculty understandings of rigor (Price, 2024). Black women navigate these spaces while being vulnerable to anxiety, hypervisibility, invisibility, and academic ableism (Dolmage, 2017; Okello, 2021).

I used the Black Feminist Disability Framework (Bailey & Mobley, 2019) to help explain Black dis/abled women's experience with harmful racialization, racism, racist, and ableist encounters within higher education. Additionally, this critical higher education inquiry is supported by integration of Black Studies and Disability Studies. Bailey and Mobley's (2019) framework summarily invites closer interrogation and understanding of the strength and utility of Black Studies and Disability Studies together, in conceptualizing a gendered, racialized, and dis/abled experience simultaneously. In this paper I intentionally integrate poetry and language often outside of academic norms. My employment of poetry emphasizes, critiques, and provides analysis on what cannot be adequately communicated in academic writing alone (Fitzpatrick & Fitzpatrick, 2020).

*The Period. Of. Masking² and Pretending. Is. Over.
For. It. Is. Costly. (Stephens, 2022, p. 16)*

Defining Terms and Concepts

Neurodiverse and neurodiversity (Chapman, 2020; Kapp et al., 2013) are terms relating to the vast spectrum of neurotypical and neurodiverse ways that people's brains work and operate. Neurodiversity reflects the understanding that no two brains operate the same, with the term neurodiverse reflecting that diversity of brains. Additionally, this is when brains and brain behavior operate outside of neurotypical and "expected" ways. Neurodivergent relates primarily to people whose brains work and operate differently, outside of what is considered normative.

Though person-first language (which places emphasis on the person, then the disability) is commonly used today (Flink, 2019), one aspect of my research is the inherent ways that it points to dis/ability as the (unwelcome) center in the lives of Black women graduate students. As a result, my use of identity-first language (which places the disability before the person), is intentional and mirrors the often-jarring nature of dis/ability in the lives of Black women graduate students, claiming dis/ability explicitly. This population's coming-to-terms with dis/ability as a reality, serves as a visceral insertion into "dis/ability" as conversation, experience, lives, and culture. Whereas they might formerly exist alongside dis/ability (and sparingly so), this educational research project, study, and paper give them their own space to be dis/abled, with impunity. Given this situational, cultural, lack-of-inclusion, and #DisabilityTooWhite—a trending hashtag on Twitter/X (Thompson, 2016)—educational research context, it is an act of subversion to revise the past, to eventually arrive at the contemporary (people-first language), and hopefully the future.

Neurodivergent lived experiences are linked to dis/abilities such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), dyslexia, dyscalculia, Tourette syndrome, and auditory processing disorder. Here, I center Black women graduate students who experience these dis/abilities, and the executive dysfunction related to them. In this paper, dis/ability refers to "the entire context in which a person functions" (Annamma et al., 2016, p. 1). My usage of Black relates to the construct of race and includes a global understanding of Blackness. Black in this context extends beyond race, and, in addition, includes and recognizes ethnic identity as well. Here, Black refers to those with lineage or heritage of the African Diaspora (Afro-Caribbean,

² Masking is a term used to represent behavior that some neurodivergent people employ to convey and amplify artificial sameness with neurotypical people. In masking, neurodivergent people mirror neurotypicals and are in a constant state of becoming something/someone other than themselves.

Black American, and Continental African), and who identify as Black. Women in this paper's context refers to those who are cisgender and identify as women and female. Graduate student in this paper's context relates to any Black woman who, at the time of this study's development, was enrolled in a graduate program at an institution in the continental United States.

Positionality Statement

As a dis/abled Black woman, neurodivergent, early career scholar, tenure track faculty member with ADHD, and a former graduate student navigating diagnosis during my doctoral program, this work is personal. Further, my late adult (non-childhood) diagnosis helped me to understand and interrogate the roles that my race, immigrant status, and class status played in the lack of intervention in my urban schooling during childhood (Stephens, 2020, 2022). The lack of psychoeducational testing and the lack of culturally competent educators made it difficult for the Guyanese and Caribbean immigrant community I grew up in to seek testing and support. My diagnosis as a doctoral student was challenging, disorienting, and heartbreaking. It involved a period of mourning the chances in life I had not received. I wrestled with this loss, and it became an opportunity to reflect, embrace my creativity, and seek answers as to how I "made" it to a PhD program without such crucial information. *Did nobody care about Black children in my Brooklyn & Queens neighborhood? What would mi brethren dem mek ah dis? What eyepass would dis bring mi muddah inna di critical immigrant enclave? Why was there silence when I repeatedly failed math, refused to do homework, and hated middle and high school??? How was I even enrolled in a PhD program? When were they going to find out I was a fake, and was my #IslandBrilliance (Bent et al., 2023) and our reasoning sessions for naught? After all, my identity had successfully been shredded to oblivion and I was desperate for information on neurodivergence in Black women. This new word in my life... "dis/ability" was woefully under researched. A match had been lit and my project was born.*

Literature Review

Space, Place, and Harm in Higher Education

Black spatial considerations of space and place (McKittrick, 2006) highlight meaning in and across various geographies. McKittrick (2006) argues that space and place are not neutral, but rather are shaped by power relations and inequalities. The physical and social spaces of graduate school negatively contrib-

ute (Ohito, 2021) to the experiences of Black women students with dis/abilities and neurodivergence, as harm is one result of their engaging in higher education. Spatial considerations remain important, as the setting and environment both can be shaped and cultivated by academic institutions, departments, and programs. Inequality and microaggressions based on race and gender alone are not the sole arbiters of injury to Black women collegians. Dis/ability (in)justice, and academic ableism (Dolmage, 2017) exist in part due to misunderstanding and lack of education about the full scope of dis/ability and the diversity of those impacted by it.

The population of Black women in graduate school has grown via successful recruitment and programming efforts that indicate understanding of the value of a diverse student body (Milem, 2003). This benefit of their hypervisibility en route to graduate school does not equate to a sense of invisibility once they enroll and matriculate (Haynes et al., 2016; Showunmi, 2023). Within the space that is higher education, considerations of minoritized students' experiences must not be forgotten. The geographies in and around academia are determinants to whether a gendered or racialized student will excel or fail (Stephens, 2022). McKittrick's (2011) employment of space and place underscores the challenges Black women students experience in academia, as they are seen and unseen.

Blackness and Disability

In consideration of Blackness within dis/ability discourse, it is often written about with separateness of Black and dis/ability (Pickens, 2019). This separateness is starting to disappear with discourse that identifies similarities, and existing alongside the other (Schalk, 2022). Blackness is many things, far beyond what this paper allows for, and in that is a state of being—a racial identity, and a classification system. Blackness is also positioned as the other outside of whiteness. Similarly, dis/ability is positioned as the other outside of ability. Theorizing Blackness on its own including its history, brilliance, arts, and other expressions, becomes diminished without inclusion of its existence within Disability Studies, Mad Studies, and Crip Studies. In Black Disability Studies, Blackness and dis/ability's co-existence upholds that a full expression of Blackness ceases to exist without dis/ability (Hinton, 2021).

Blackness in the context of disability has a long history, with Bell's (2010) seminal work critically bringing together long-ranging discourse highlighting cognitive impairment and slavery, canonical African American literature's engagement with dis/ability and illness, Blackness and war, and dis/abil-

ity in hip-hop music and rhetoric. Lastly, but not absolutely, this story is a continued experience of both existing inside and outside. The ways that Blackness and dis/ability are viewed as outsiders to White and able-bodied culture, Black Disability Studies, for example, bring the two to the center, and away from the margins. Together, Blackness and dis/ability allow for forward-moving conventions of Black culture but done so by centering inclusivity.

Racialization and Disability

Racialization is understood to be the process of sorting, grouping, and “race-ing” groups of people, rather than the formation of race itself (Hochman, 2019). Racialization toward Black people, Black experience, and Black life invites harmful, deadly, and degrading attitudes and behaviors that Black people are subject to. Negative racialization and implicit dis/ableism of Black people is strongly connected to anti-Blackness. The impact of negative racialization of Black people and Blackness continues to share a common thread in history, as it is not a new occurrence. Tyler (2022) posits as much with historical accounts going as far back as U.S. chattel slavery, antebellum, and postbellum of the entanglement of Blackness, anti-Blackness, and dis/ability. Racialization’s positioning of Blackness on the fringes, or *outside*, mirrors the categorization of normal or normative, versus the dis/abled mind, body, or person, existing outside of that. In this way, racialization of Blackness and Black people successfully ostracizes and categorizes Black people, alongside ability and dis/ability.

Further, the harm of this racialization is that it impacts various facets of everyday life, policy, and support for dis/abilities in Black communities. It serves to gatekeep solutions, diagnosis, outreach, and support for diverse communities of people with dis/abilities (diagnosed or not) (Artiles, 2013), which has disproportionately impacted Black students across the pk-20 continuum over decades, and, conversely, has the potential to overcorrect, oversupport, overdiagnose, and over research White disabled pk-20 populations (Stapleton & James, 2020).

Academic Surveillance

Part of the challenge with being hyper visible in academia is that it may be predicated and reliant on performance, aptitude, or accomplishments (Macfarlane, 2021). The space itself is a welcoming one when a student meets and surpasses its measurements of excellence, academic rigor, and intelligence. Conversely, the place itself is unbalanced and strife with competition, celebrating non-collegial behaviors, highly individualistic, dependent on repeated feats of

excellence and proven academic performance (Guiffida, 2006; Guiffida et al., 2012). When academia and higher education both occupy the space and place, it can incubate and cultivate the best and worst behaviors, some of which may threaten its very existence (Okello, 2021). Acknowledging race (Black), gender (woman), and disability (neurodivergence) further complicates any understanding of educational contexts (Annamma et al., 2016). Additionally, the dissonance within visibility and invisibility in academic contexts is often predicated on who (or what) is setting the rules or conditions for dissonance to occur. Multiply minoritized students’ experience of the academic gaze is highly dependent on who is doing the gazing, potential benefits to the gazing, and the deemed importance of the gaze. The surveillance of Black bodies is not new (Browne, 2015) and exists in ways that dis/abled Black women students may not be able to overcome. In order to be in the system of academia, dis/abled Black women must allow themselves to be seen and unseen within (the) power structure that is academia.

Disabled Black Women Graduate Students’ Compounding Pressures

Contemporary disability and higher education research and scholars continue to advance complex discourse at the nexus of race and disability (e.g., Annamma et al., 2016; Evans et al., 2017; Miller, 2018; Stapleton & Croom, 2017). Conversely, research on graduate school experiences for minority and specifically gendered students with dis/abilities and neurodivergence is scarce (Easley, 2022), which can be traced to scattered focuses which mirror multifaceted aspects of discussions on dis/ability. For instance, medical dis/ability, social and cultural dis/ability all mean different things but exist in the same ecosystem of dis/ability discourse (Barnes, 2019; Hogan, 2019). Students with specific dis/abilities, such as ADHD, autism, OCD, and auditory processing disorder, face unique challenges in graduate school due to their executive functioning. Executive functioning challenges are very disruptive to the elements of reading, writing, thinking, and motivation—all integral to a successful and productive graduate student’s output.

Disabled Black women graduate students’ engagement with the nuances of their identities as well as compartmentalizing them to succeed in graduate school is often proven difficult. In a system where they might be highlighted as beacons of representation and student success, many were succeeding at a high cost, while suffering silently (Walkington, 2017). Needing support and accommodations as a racialized and gendered graduate student could lend

to opening oneself up to scrutiny and stigma. To bypass the vulnerability and scrutiny that may accompany disclosure, masking becomes more prevalent as a method of survival (Kidwell et al., 2023; Radulski, 2022), especially in academic spaces, which are a graduate student's primary workplace. Deciding whether to disclose or mask (Pearson & Rose, 2021) adds additional pressure to dis/abled Black women graduate students' lives and academic experiences.

Disabled Black Women Graduate Students' Digital Ecosystem

Within the geography of higher education, students' use of social media and the internet is helpful in them making sense of their environment, helping shape their identities, and helping to underscore self-advocacy. The community building aspect of social media use has been chronicled in the academic lives of LGBTQ students and dis/abled students (Miller, 2017). Student's ability to create their own spaces and micro communities is an important aspect of their development, as it can provide "critical opportunities for LGBTQ youth to explore their identities and develop important skills," such as the ability to "rehearse crucial developmental tasks (coming out, cultivating identity, increasing self-confidence, self-acceptance, building relationships)" (Miller, 2017, p. 332). Black women's spaces have historically been a solution to preserve cultural norms while upholding and celebrating each other, sans trauma from the outside world or influences. This is no different in academia where sister circles, women's spaces, and gendered identity centers provide respite (Boveda & McCray 2021; Howard et al., 2016). Disabled Black women's virtual counter spaces provide contemporary solutions using social media and technology to care for themselves and each other while navigating graduate school and less representation in dis/ability research (Blaser & Ladner, 2020; Stapleton & James, 2020), universities' accounting of enrolled dis/abled students, dis/ability alongside other diversity efforts, (Scheef et al., 2020) and among their peers.

Lastly, Black women's ability to produce online or digital spaces and digital culture for their own community building (Quashie, 2004) is present here. Bourdieu's (1993) theory of cultural production encompasses high and low capital in certain social spaces. Bourdieu (1993) also posits that cultural production itself is guided by low levels of economic capital and high levels of cultural capital. The ways in which disabled Black women graduate students make space for each other online (Miller, 2017), helps them solidify community, especially around the topic of dis/ability (Tsatsou, 2020).

Theoretical Framing

My inquiry is guided by the Black Feminist Disability Framework (BFDF) (Bailey & Mobley, 2019), which acknowledges the intersectional experiences of Black women with dis/abilities and the unique challenges they face. The Black Feminist Disability Framework is especially prevalent in academic settings and posits that Black resiliency and survival that inherently exists for *all* Black people is ableist. This Framework notes that Black hypervisibility means Black subjects are barred from weakness while constantly being surveilled. This understanding upholds a superhuman expectation for Black people in their day-to-day life that erases their humanity and precludes them from being dis/abled all or some of the time.

The Black Feminist Disability Framework recognizes the impact of systemic oppression, such as racism, ableism, and sexism, on the lives of Black women with dis/abilities. It also acknowledges the importance of considering the social, cultural, and political contexts in which these experiences occur. This study centers the experiences of Black women with dis/abilities and neurodivergence in graduate school to better understand their intersecting experiences.

This framework complicates the choices Black women must make, choices made for them, and historical rewrites of groundbreaking disabled Black women, such as Harriet Tubman and Audre Lorde. These rewrites miss an opportunity to tell the truth about Black women, while also telling untruths about the impact of individuals living life with multiple marginalized identities (in this case, Disabled Black women). The Black Feminist Disability Framework suggests that members of society, both academic and nonacademic, are being robbed of humanity and their own experiences. The racialized terms of engagement make the lives of and graduate school experiences of dis/abled Black women radically different than their graduate student peers who are racialized and gendered differently. This aspect of race and dis/ability cannot be understated and are reflected in the following research questions guiding this study.

Research Question(s)

Collectively, my study consists of distinct statements of the problems and the research questions that animate them. The study is framed by this main research question that structures my inquiry:

RQ 1: How do neurodivergent Black women graduate students navigate their race and disability while enrolled in higher education?

The secondary questions follow:

- How do neurodivergent Black women graduate students' experience and understanding of Blackness shape their experience in graduate school?
- How do disability and diagnosis color the experiences of Black neurodivergent women as they navigate their graduate studies?
- How does neurodivergent Black women's responsive cultural production allow them to create space in these (sociopolitical) times, despite being ensconced within the places (read environments) that are higher education institutions?

Methodology

My study employed a critical qualitative approach to explore the experiences of Black women graduate students with dis/abilities and neurodivergence experiences enrolled in graduate school. My choices and paradigm as a researcher in this project were informed by my critical worldview and lived experiences. My study employed an additional grounding in its use of Portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005) as a method for exploring participants' stories. Portraiture was selected as a complement to the Black Feminist Disability Framework but is not foregrounded nor employed as the theoretical framework. Portraiture served more in support of expanding how as a researcher, I could engage more deeply with participants' stories. Portraiture demands a truthful researcher and an observant one. Portraiture as a methodology is a rigorous, intimate, and detailed methodology that prides itself on being a "cross between art and science, its blend of aesthetic sensibilities and empirical rigor, and its humanistic and literary metaphors" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005 p. 4). Portraiture is both analytical and community minded.

Furthermore, I grounded data analysis through employing Poetic Inquiry (Faulkner, 2017; Leavy, 2017), an arts-based research method. Both portraiture and poetic inquiry allowed for deeper reflection and analysis and pushed beyond the limits and capabilities of traditional academic discourse. This methodology dares to invite in innovative and creative languages, with deep creative engagement via poetry and prose. Poetry is a powerful supplement to the honesty, authenticity, and strengths of portraiture. According to Faulkner (2019), "poetic inquiry" can be used "as both a method and product of research activity" (p. 14). Together, portraiture and poetic inquiry allowed for deeper reflection, and push beyond the limits of the capabilities of traditional academic discourse.

Lastly, as a researcher I used accessible methodologies in the construction of the interview protocol and was very mindful to work with the executive (dys)function needs of the participants before and beyond my protocol design and implementation. There is an opportunity for higher education research (and doctoral training) to integrate disability-minded methods, frameworks, and accommodations-centric methods (Brown et al., 2019; Peña et al., 2018). Many best practices and considerations were ascertained from point-to-point, after each level of engagement in the study. Accessible and mindful language had to be considered and put into practice. This necessity was integrated into recruitment materials, survey materials, pre-and post-data collection, and in uniquely designed participant communication and follow up at every intersection. Educational research design and methods have laid foundational guidance for engaging in research (Boveda & McCray, 2021; Fitzwater, 2018) within dis/abled communities, although not specifically with regard to the intersection of race and gender (Bowleg, 2008).

Data Sources

Study participants were enrolled in various higher education institutions across the country. The site of the study was further complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic, as (a) all interviews were conducted virtually, and (b) all interviews took place wherever participants had a strong internet connection and a private space to engage in conversation. My study's success was influenced by its specific eligibility qualifications. Due to the prohibitively expensive, inaccessible, and deeply personal experiences related to diagnosis and dis/ability, it was not mandatory that participants have an official diagnosis. Rather, it was enough that participants experienced executive dysfunction symptoms often linked to neurodivergence and cognitive disabilities. By not having diagnosis qualifiers, any interested participant who was otherwise found eligible (Black woman graduate student) could participate freely. This approach was specifically taken to uphold that one could live with a dis/ability sans diagnosis, and their experiences still mattered. Furthermore, while the pathway to diagnosis is more difficult for racialized people, diagnosis "papers" would not be reified as an absolute in my study, nor would it serve as a barrier. I sought participants who identified (or suspected) having ADHD, autism, OCD, auditory processing disorder, dyslexia, and dyscalculia. Eighty percent of my participants identified as having ADHD with the remainder identifying other disabilities. Participants were aged 18-50 and were matriculated graduate students. Eleven of my four-

teen participants were enrolled in doctoral programs, and three in master's programs. All participants identified as Black women.

Data Collection

Demographics survey and screening questionnaires were made available online, with an electronic flyer shared on social media platforms and via professional networks. Demographic questions and screening questions were separate to be considerate of the population's executive functioning and focus challenges, instead of disseminating one long survey that could be quickly abandoned due to overwhelm. Both the survey and screening questionnaires were made accessible via Qualtrics via multiple online modalities (mobile, desktop, tablet). I designed the protocol to ease overwhelm for someone with executive functioning challenges, neurocognitive differences, or limited attention and visual and sensory needs. Additional accessibility tools were in place (Likert scale answer fields, fill-in, multiple choice) and a visible progress bar to indicate survey percentage completion, as well as repetitive and, thereby, predictable language. My digital flyers had accessible color combinations (dark and light contrast), accessible typeface and font. In addition, attention to simple and succinct language was used, avoiding jargon.

Eligible study participants received my pre-written, template email communication that I wrote and programmed to auto send, and re-auto send, serving as timed reminders. I enabled three reminder emails to be automatically sent to participants ahead of their scheduled interviews, in the timeframe of five days, two days, and one day ahead. This approach was used to accommodate for symptoms of executive dysfunction such as time blindness, forgetfulness, object permanence, and cognitive overload.

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews with participants. With intentional, accessible recruitment and interview protocol in mind, this study was written, facilitated, and completed with the dis/abled community's needs at the forefront. Fourteen participants (see Table 1) shared their experiences during semi-structured interviews, which were audio-recorded and transcribed. Interviews ranged from 90 to 120 minutes. Participants shared their experiences in graduate school, including their challenges and how their identities have influenced their experiences. Additionally, they discussed their experiences with academic ableism, strategies they used to navigate these challenges, and the physical and social spaces in (and outside of) graduate school and how they contribute to their experiences. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis

This study's methodological grounding in portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005) was special for its potential for exploration of participants' narratives. Poetic inquiry also proved useful for data analysis. Both portraiture and poetic inquiry allowed for humanizing analysis via journaling and notes taken after interviews. As a result, I, as the researcher, was able to gain "cognitive and sensory" awareness of the data, which helps the "reader to experience the research findings in a visceral way" (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2021, p. 66). As a creative and as an intellectual, I was able to remember that "we are drawn to poetic inquiry because it allows research to be an embodied process informed by the lived experience and knowledge of the researcher" (Esposito & Evans-Winters, p. 66, 2021). Poetry and poetic inquiry support my interpretation and analysis of what participants have shared with me.

My data analysis included three coding cycles and one final phase of interpretation, for multi-level analysis and multi-level coding. My first coding cycle has included both inductive and deductive coding (Miles et al., 2013). I began by using deductive codes reflecting the concepts from my interview protocol and the Black Feminist Disability Framework (Bailey & Mobley, 2019). There were 12 codes connected to my first order coding: race and being, race and stigma, race and support, dis/ability and inclusion, dis/ability and self-identification, dis/ability and disparities, higher education and accommodations, good online community, creativity, creating community, adaptive responses, and lastly, new futures. In addition, I used open codes to identify recurrent patterns in participants' experiences and meaning making. Where possible I have used participants' own words for these codes through a process called in vivo coding using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo. It should be noted that the NVivo software was merely the technology used to facilitate and execute my analysis process, but I, as a human *and* humane researcher, and as a disabled and neurodivergent researcher, intuited what it could not.

After initial coding, I conducted analysis by examining the patterns in my codes and looking for categories that brought together the most important ideas in my study (Bhattacharya, 2021). Some categories that appeared in my second round of coding included neurodiversity, dis/ability identity, culture, participants' higher education experiences, and categories related to their higher education experiences. Additionally, I compared my coding to prior scholarship on neurodivergent graduate students to ensure that I thought holistically about their experiences.

This approach strengthened my understanding of where my participants' experiences might be under-represented by existing scholarship. My third-order coding process was a majority inductive process, and I explored the relationships among all categories. My goal was to bring together multiple categories and explore connections between them. A key step in this stage of coding was storying the data (Kinloch et al., 2020). To do that, I looked for verbs that connected one category to another.

After completing my formal three-phase data analysis, I engaged in the portraiture process as a final and interpretive step. I grouped selected representative participant excerpts which were written in a way in which answered research questions were pieced together, displaying their overall and shared experiences. In portraiture, each participant would have brief and storied vignettes spotlighting them. Folding data into research question responses allowed me to narrate the overall participant story, which served as a snapshot of participants' narratives told in a way which highlighted the stories of them. The vignettes were stylized together in my retelling of their narrative and, altogether, serve to repackage their story, from my standpoint as a portraitist.

Reliability

To ensure reliability and credibility in my dataset, I employed member checking during my interviews, by repeating and affirming what was shared with me. In portraiture, the researcher is also referred to as the portraitist (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005), and as the researcher/portraitist, I am positioned to embody the role of being an instrument for *both* a retelling and restorying of participant experiences (Kinloch et al., 2020). As a result, in the methodology of portraiture, it is critical for the researcher/portraitist to engage in ongoing reflection. This reflection was done using journals, research memos, and a critical lens. Research memos and journaling were essential to aid in my poetic retelling of their experiences, as well as substantiating findings. I wrote research memos after each participant interview and journaled my reflections of the process. Original poetry (Okello & Morton, 2022) originates from these memos and journals, to bring forward the experiences of dis/abled racialized scholars in academia.

Limitations

One limitation of the study is that one's connection to "dis/ability" as status and identity can occur over lifelong and inconsistent amounts of time, which this study and research design did not account for. As this was not a longitudinal study, I could not have

added that context and consideration, which may have underscored the realities and inconveniences of living with dis/abilities. Another intentional choice was to include participants who identified as Black cisgender Women, to not dilute or diminish the experiences of non-binary, transwomen, or other individuals with different expressions and lived experiences of womanhood or gender. I intentionally designed and recruited for cisgender women. Understanding the complexities of identities within identities, in order to understand the Black woman's experience related to dis/ability while in graduate school, I designed a study for and recruited Black women who are at the center of this research and this inquiry.

Findings

I organized the study's findings into three thematic sections: Participants' self-concept of Blackness, healing spaces outside of academia to make sense of dis/ability, and their faith-based beliefs related to diagnosis and medication management. I titled the thematic sections as follows: (a) An understanding of self, an understanding of Blackness, (b) Black women's online healing spaces, and (c) faith as a mitigating factor.

Wherever I come from, and wherever I now exist, it is never void of my Blackness. To live, and to see, and to feel is to know this. My heart and my life do not belie me this. My Blackness is expansive, rich, and every-day. It belongs in every-way.

(Stephens-Peace).

An Understanding of Self, An Understanding of Blackness

This theme emphasizes the participants' journeys of self-discovery, intricately intertwined with their evolving understanding of Blackness. Participants demonstrated a deep sense of knowing about their racial and ethnic identity, which surpasses any barriers imposed by academic institutions and contemporary sociopolitical realities. Despite facing anti-Blackness within the graduate school environment, they remain committed to exploring the essence of their racial and ethnic identities, most often via intellectual pursuits. These findings highlight the tensions they experienced to have others better understand them, often interwoven with an unwavering self-concept of Blackness. No geographic or institutional barrier was greater than their racial and ethnic identity and allegiance. Participants were from the full African Diaspora; any anti-Blackness they experienced in their graduate studies, academic institutions, and

social and political worlds contributed to increased steadfastness and soberness. For Pennie, a fifth-year education doctoral student, it was a “sociopolitical reality that Blackness in graduate school was almost inconvenient” but she herself would not lean into others’ limitations. Victoria, a sixth-year anthropology doctoral student reported on respectability politics, others’ understanding of her Blackness, and how gender and race “occupy” the academy to set her aside compared to Black men colleagues:

Blackness distorts...There are many reasons, all are about anti-Blackness, but one is the sort of way in which Blackness is presumed to be made in the collective unconscious of the US. Regarding the Black male academic, the cultural imagination [is], there’s Black men and there’s everybody else. [Also], I guess for me, everyone will think I have a bad attitude, most likely, and everyone will assume that I’m working on “Black things.” To me, unconsciously it’s a question of respectability. I don’t know if it’s respectability, so much as [maybe] the exception. The exception to the rule, not exception as like, [you’re] exceptional.

This finding is consistent with the work on Black people and surveillance (Browne, 2015). This “hyper sight” thrust upon Victoria contributes to gendered exclusion (Browne, 2015). This exclusion is, to her, at the benefit of Black men and the expense of Black women, yet she continues to move past it, refusing to dalliance with an observation of her. Instead she acknowledges it and keeps moving forward.

Black Women’s Online Healing Spaces

The theme “Spaces That Heal and Places That... (Traumatize)” illuminates participants’ experiences within physical and virtual (online) geographies. Black women graduate students have reimagined space through technological and historical community-building, feminist practices (Combahee River Collective, 1977), and creating empowering digital spaces. These spaces counterbalance the harm inflicted by academic institutions (read places), and academic ableism within. Participants also express their exhaustion with shallow institutional diversity and recruitment initiatives, calling for tangible results, and emphasizing the importance of retention. Sabrina, a third-year doctoral student, indicated her exhaustion from initiatives. “Initiatives are great, but what about results? Recruitment is great, but what is recruitment without retention.”

These online spaces of their own design and community-building gave them back power and strength.

The online community Viola turned to was mostly on social media and other online spaces. The community worked well for her in finding people to work with, to experience the process of thinking and writing with. For Tangi, a doctoral student, the aspect of building community with Black people was especially important in her racially homogenous program. Institutional harm was offset with the fact that many participants shared their desire to enter faculty careers, continuing to commit themselves to academia. Black women continue to highlight that healing spaces are within their creativity, control, and community, in order for them to survive higher education.

Faith as a Mitigating Factor

Participants shared that their faith and religious beliefs prevented them from seeking help or obtaining diagnosis, treatment, and medication. Participants shared that familial pressures and expectations forced them to mask and pretend quite often, so that they did not disappoint family members who held them in high esteem. The familial pressure also reiterated an overreliance on prayer life and church to deal with executive functioning symptoms. Yasmine shared that the Black church compounded her challenges:

The Black culture aspect, a lot of Black elders said, “Education was the only thing that mattered; we love to see that you’re so smart,” so that when I needed substantial help, I didn’t know who or what to ask. I thought, “You’re not hurting that much, you can do it.” Also, we weren’t outright shamed, but we didn’t talk about these things.

The cultural barriers in the Black community toward mental health were meaningful, regardless of country of origin. Similarly for Sam, there was an understanding of more explicit discourse regarding disabilities and treatment, and appropriate solutions. Sam shared [she was] “very strong in my faith. In my church, [it’s like] let’s pray it away, you need to go to God [and] cast out the demon. But my generation is more open about talking about counseling.” Participants were from the Anglophone Caribbean, Continental Africa, and the US, and while there are differences based on ethnic experiences, participants from across the Diaspora shared this overarching connection to faith, religion, and the church that were often at odds with their dis/abilities and receiving help.

Discussion

The Black Feminist Disability Framework's (Bailey & Mobley, 2019) position that there are intersecting identities and experiences that are specific to Black women with dis/abilities remains consistent with the findings of my study. Black women graduate students experience the complexity of their race and gender within graduate school, while navigating their adjacency to dis/ability and dis/ability culture. This finding reflects the Black Feminist Disability Framework's assertion that the goalpost of expectation is inconsistent, ableist, and continually presents pressures, challenges, and unwarranted discord in dis/abled Black women graduate students. Widespread racism, sexism, and academic ableism permeate the experiences of this emergent student community.

Intersecting Identities at the Forefront

Participants' understanding of their race, gender, and Blackness were deeply interconnected. For Victoria, her gender rendered her siloed and secondary to Black men in graduate school. Victoria centered her Blackness against the institution, what goes on in the institution, and who is valued in the institution. Continued cycles of racialized existence contribute to racial battle fatigue (Linder et al., 2019) that many across higher education feel. Their self-consciousness and race-consciousness as Black women never wavered despite the challenges the construct of race and racism provide. Students with a strong racialized identity and development of self may be better equipped, despite racial battle fatigue, to identify harmful rhetoric and policies, and to fervently work toward managing their higher education experience.

A healthy racial identity awareness is positive and informs students more deeply of their own lives, experiences, histories, and futures (Okello, 2020). This understanding also supports the potential for intergroup dialogue and intergroup success. There are understandings of Blackness, from any geographical orientation in the African Diaspora, and there is also the way that they understand (a) how their Blackness is understood by others and (b) how their Blackness is used and interpreted by others. This understanding allows them to assess their environment, and to decide how to engage within it. It also allows Black women graduate students to claim what their Blackness looks like alongside other identities such as dis/ability or at the intersection of gender. Such a claiming provides a road map for survival and sometimes thriving in the academy and is a direct response to the research question, "How do neurodivergent Black women graduate student's experience of and understanding of Blackness, shape their experience in graduate school?"

Technology Use as Survival

Black women's use of technology and the internet allows alternatives for community building. Historically, Black women's connection to each other has inspired feminist groups, thinking, and groundbreaking scholarly contributions (Combahee River Collective, 1977). The Combahee River Collective (1977) is an example of modeled community care and making things plain by writing it down. Black women using social media have provided powerful counter spaces to support each other while navigating graduate school and navigating the unknown of dis/ability. This navigation reflects Black women's historical ability to create (counter) spaces that work for them. In this study, participants push back against the harm done in academia due to racism, sexism, ableism, and other aggressions, by convening on their own terms and continuing a historical path that is decidedly Black and feminist. This finding relates to the research question, "How does neurodivergent Black women's responsive cultural production allow them to create space in these (sociopolitical) times, despite being ensconced within the places (read environments) that are higher education institutions?" By adopting McKittrick's (2011) perspective on space and place, which recognizes their inherent power relations and inequalities, this study highlights the need to reimagine physical, online, social, and collegial spaces within the academy (Luedke, 2023).

Faith, Religion, and Disability

Cultural understanding of how integral faith and religion is within the Black community, reliance on faith and religion has been utilized as a tool for all life challenges. The limiting way dis/ability is generally engaged within the Black community further underscored participants' reticence to engage in diagnosis-seeking experiences and/or taking medication, when faith and religion/iosity may be positioned as the only, rather than together/and. Therapy, mental health, and mental wellness are not oxymorons to faith, religion, religiosity, and the institution that is the Black Church. They can coexist.

Participants' burdens stemmed closely from an overreliance and over obligation on them in their familial communities, their cultural communities, and civic or service communities. This burden of expectation is tied to a burden of both high academic performance and achievement, and is exhausting, dehumanizing, and ableist. Participants expressed an inability to let others down, and obligations to always be present, in all situations, or run the risk of being obsolete in the very professional and academic spaces they have worked hard to enter (Hutcheon, & Wollbring, 2013).

Significance and Future Directions

The present study's implications lie in its potential to inform inclusive policies and practices that better support Black women graduate students and enhance their academic outcomes. Acknowledging and addressing the presence of diverse sub-groups within marginalized communities is crucial for promoting positive visibility and creating inclusive counter spaces. Such initiatives will enable students to thrive and foster a more inclusive higher education environment.

Implications for Research

This study points to the importance of building theoretical models that center space, place, dis/ability, and race. These vectors collide to create unique experiences for Black women graduate students. The spaces (both physical and virtual) created by neurodivergent Black women must be brought into the fold of learning, pedagogy, and the academic climate across contemporary higher education. Culturally relevant and accessible research methodologies are necessary toward equity and equality in research, teaching, and learning. Future iterations of this research will provide opportunities for inquiry on Black and disabled faculty and staff, and at HBCU or majority Black, Caribbean higher education institutions.

Implications for Practice

Disability centers staffed with diverse workers and campus counseling centers staffed with diverse clinicians will shape better and far-reaching interventions. Additionally, faculty hiring practices will benefit from specific and intentionality about increasing the number of dis/abled faculty members, many who will support dis/abled Black women students. Cultural competency in academic spaces extends beyond issues of race and gender and sexuality. The addition of dis/ability as an additional culture, shifts an evolving discourse, and dis/ability labs on-campus with attention to curriculum design, and universal design for learning will make a more accessible environment for all institutional stakeholders.

Conclusion

This inquiry offers a compelling exploration of the experiences of disabled, neurodivergent Black women in graduate school, combining the Black Feminist Disability framework, and Black Disability Studies. Delving into Black women graduate student narratives reveals the complexities of their intersectional identities and the challenges they face within the academic landscape. It serves as a call to action

for academia to engage in transformative practices that prioritize the experiences and needs of marginalized students. Ultimately, this research contributes to building a more equitable and inclusive higher education system. When respectability politics and (academic) ableism come into frame, Black women are working to uphold impossible ableist expectations of the strong Black woman.

Strong Black woman meets Supercrip.

This is my story too.

As Diversity's Cream of the Crop, Black Woman's humanity is limited.

YET others just want a reason to clap.

For... Our. Their. My. Existence.

(Stephens-Peace)

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