

Racialized Disablement and the 'Disability-Disablement Dialectic'

Historically, disability studies has focused on the recuperation of disability as an identity and as that which to celebrate and take pride in as a community. *Critical* disability scholars complicate both the meaning and experience of disability under ongoing conditions of oppression involving racism, war, impoverishment, exploitation, occupation, and dispossession, critiquing the uneven distribution of disability under racial capitalism. In this talk, I argue that if disability studies is about the meaning, experience, and cultural constructions of disability that inform and produce contemporary social relations, then there is no disability outside racialized/ing disability. I propose *racialized disablement* as a heuristic to help acknowledge this fact, to build in the impulse that race is always already disable-ized and disability is always already racialized. Such reconceptualization of disability aims to move beyond the liberal, often white, project of disability 'inclusion' and the erasure of Black, Indigenous, and other racialized people with disabilities.

If disability is unevenly distributed under such conditions of oppression, then we ought to focus on *how* the disabled subject is produced, rather than 'who' the disabled subject is. This does not negate the importance of *who* the disabled subject is but resituates our interrogation into the lived experience of disability through what Rachel Gorman calls the "disability-disablement dialectic."¹ For Gorman, focusing on the "disability-disablement *dialectic*" allows us to make space for the contextualization of disability, holding in tension the representation of disability as identity, status, or state of being (disability as a noun), with local and global biopolitical processes of disablement—or as Jina B. Kim puts it "the state sanctioned disablement of racialized and impoverished communities via resource deprivation."² Gorman, Kim, and other critical disability scholars work to uncover the social organization of disability in society—how disability identity circulates, what social relations are revealed or eclipsed via such circulation, and how disablement is produced given such social relations. Inviting inquiry into the historical and present co-constitution of race and disability, critical disability methodology necessitates an understanding of how structural racism, ableism, and disablement function together.

A snapshot of just the past two years reveals the insidious harms wrought through the ongoing entanglement of racism and ableism. Following the spring 2020 uprisings for racial justice and the onset of our most recent global pandemic, scholars have referred to Covid-19 and state violence against Black Americans as "twin pandemics." While our sociopolitical landscape allows for conceptualizing these pandemics as separate and thus parallel movements, the processes of racialization and disablement underpinning both, are deeply intertwined. For many disabled, Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and other people of color, Covid-19 did not appear so much as an exceptional crisis as the accumulation and compounding of state-sanctioned violence in the form of ongoing neglect and abandonment given present socioeconomic schemas and healthcare systems. The phenomenon of Covid-19 and state violence against Black individuals is more precisely a case of *mutually reinforcing* systems of power. The sociopolitical systems of racism and ableism are used here to both generate and

¹ Gorman, Rachel. (2016). "Disablement In and For Itself: Towards a "Global" Idea of Disability." *Somatechnics*, 6.2, 249-261.

² Kim, Jina B. (2017). "Toward a Crip-of-Color Critique: Thinking with Minich's "Enabling Whom?" *Lateral*, 6.1.

operate on populations to index their proximity to notions of capitalist productivity, functional normativity, disposability, and premature death.

Capturing this reality in the concept of *racialized disablement* helps illuminate the processes by which structures of racism and ableism work together to produce populations in which social and material harms concentrate. In the literature, “racialized disablement” has been used mainly to describe a certain type of disablement, proffering “racialized” as a modifier for disablement. But if we are to take seriously the co-constituting nature of ‘race’ and ‘disability’ we ought to develop a more expansive and structuring sense of the term. My development of this concept therefore situates racialized disablement as a strategy of reading, accounting for, and making sense of the depths of racial disparities in health, inequities in civic inclusion, and violent power dynamics in law, policy, and criminal punishment. It works against the narrative of a simple correlation between race and disablement, one that maintains the categorical separation of race and disability, and instead necessitates an understanding of the ongoing forces of sociopolitical *production* of race and disability. By drawing our attention to the manifestation of preventable harms and the structurally engrained wrongs that concentrate in particular bodies, racialized disablement reveals the need not simply for inclusion or equality, but reparative work to name harm and to adjudicate debt owed.