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## **Ableism in the academic trajectories of Black disabled women: an intersectional analysis**

### **Le capacitisme dans les parcours scolaires des femmes noires handicapées : une analyse intersectionnelle**

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#### **Abstract**

This paper aims to examine the implications of the intersection between ableism, sexism, and racism in the academic trajectories of Black disabled women in Brazil. The information was obtained through a sociodemographic survey form and in-depth interviews with 12 Black disabled women, which were analyzed through narrative analysis. The results showed that the intersection between ableism, sexism, and racism led to the perception of participants as less capable and a lack of recognition for those with invisible disabilities. This context has led many to adopt strategies to mask their disabilities, racial identities, and, depending on the area of training, characteristics socially associated with women as a strategy to address ableism and other oppressive systems present in the university environment. The study showed the need for universities to build their practices assuming the presence of disability and consider this experience intersectional. In addition, it

emphasizes the importance of incorporating the theme of disability in initial and continuing education and academic research agendas.

### **Résumé**

Cet article examine les effets de l'intersection entre le capacitisme, le sexisme et le racisme sur les trajectoires académiques de femmes noires handicapées au Brésil. Les données ont été recueillies à partir d'un formulaire d'enquête sociodémographique et d'entretiens approfondis menés auprès de douze participantes, puis analysées selon une approche narrative. Les résultats révèlent que cette triple oppression conduit à une perception des femmes interrogées comme étant moins compétentes, ainsi qu'à une invisibilisation des handicaps non apparents. Dans ce contexte, plusieurs d'entre elles ont adopté des stratégies de dissimulation de leur handicap, de leur identité raciale et, selon le domaine de formation, de caractéristiques socialement associées aux femmes, afin de faire face au capacitisme et aux autres systèmes d'oppression présents dans l'environnement universitaire. L'étude souligne la nécessité pour les établissements d'enseignement supérieur de concevoir leurs pratiques en reconnaissant la présence du handicap et en abordant cette expérience dans une perspective intersectionnelle. Elle insiste également sur l'importance d'intégrer la question du handicap dans la formation initiale et continue ainsi que dans les programmes de recherche universitaire.

### **Keywords**

Ableism, Disability, Intersectionality, Higher Education.

### **Mots-clés**

Capacitisme; handicap; intersectionnalité; enseignement supérieur.

## Introduction

In this paper, we examine the implications of the intersection of ableism with sexism and racism in the academic trajectories of Black disabled women. Ableism has been widely studied, focusing on its impact in higher education (Brown et al. 2021; Dolmage, 2017; Lorandi & Gesser, 2023; Price, 2024; Nishida, 2016). However, few studies examine ableism in the university context from an intersectional lens (Beche & Mendes, 2023; Brown et al., 2021; Lorandi & Gesser, 2023; Singer & Bacon, 2020).

Intersectional analysis of social phenomena is a fundamental perspective in social research and practice. It allows us to understand how multiple forms of discrimination and oppression intersect and produce effects in different social contexts. By considering issues such as gender, race, disability, class, and regionality, it is possible to examine how these dimensions structure the experiences and opportunities of people traversed by them in a complex and interconnected way. Thus, Collins and Bilge (2020) highlight that intersectionality is a relevant analytical tool for the visibility of oppression in the direction of social justice. However, Bailey and Mobley (2019) warn that there is a difficulty in intersecting gender, race, and disability, and that this may be due to the form in which the fields of studies were constituted. Disability studies often neglects the impact of racism and sexism on disability, just as race studies tend to omit the realities of disability and the impact of sexism on race.

In the context of higher education, Singer and Bacon (2020) highlight that ableism and other oppression systems interrelate and operate together to maintain the privilege of

those considered capable. The authors indicate that the academy encourages students and professors to hide their shortcomings, as it:

upholds neoliberal conceptions of individualism, competition, and independence, which makes the experiences of faculty and students who do not conform to able-bodied and able-minded norms very challenging. Students and faculty who present themselves in non-normative ways are often pressured to assimilate and hide their disabilities or differences (Singer & Bacon, 2020, p. 05).

Therefore, those who can reproduce the normative ideals of the nondisabled subject—who walk with their legs, perceive the world with their vision and hearing, and have intellectual functioning and a mental health condition considered typical—are more welcome at a university. In contrast, Evans et al. (2017) highlight that those who look, behave, think, communicate, and interpret their worlds in ways that diverge from what is considered the standard are explicitly and implicitly excluded or expelled from this context.

In the context of higher education, the intersection of ableism with other oppressive systems has produced several effects on students who are often marginalized. A phenomenon portrayed by Abes and Wallace (2018) is that of the hypervisibility of students with disabilities in the university environment, which is an aspect of the reproduction of ableism at a moment when the student is no longer seen as a person with rights but rather based on their disability and incapacity. The hypervisibility of disability, according to Brown and Leigh (2018), contributes to the erasure of other intersectional characteristics, such as race, sexual orientation, and social class.

Thus, ableism is disproportionately experienced by students whose disability intersects with privileged or marginalized identities, shaping the complexity of the disability experience in higher education (Casement et al., 2017; Freedman et al., 2020). The intersection between race and disability produces even greater oppression since Black people have been historically pathologized, further reinforcing the experience of ableism by this social group, which is doubly excluded from the prototype/stereotype of a university student (Abes & Wallace, 2018). Taylor (2015) highlights that the stigma that Black women are intellectually incapable has turned their resistance into a lack of self-control and incapacity.

Based on authors such as Linton (1998) and Oliver (1992), we highlight the political relevance of people with disabilities within the university and critically analyze ableism as strongly naturalized in academia to produce cracks and “crip” (Mello & Gavério, 2019) this context. Although there is still much to advance in using the analytical tool of intersectionality in higher education, we will present some narrated scenes that make visible situations experienced daily by people with disabilities, showing how the intersection of various oppressive systems generates specific forms of oppression.

## **Method**

### ***Theoretical and methodological inspirations***

This research is qualitative and epistemologically based on the dialogue between disability studies in education and feminist disability studies. The field of disability studies in education has as its central premise the deconstruction of the patterns of normality widely reproduced in education systems, which hinder the inclusion of students with

disabilities and other marginalized groups (Connor & Gabel, 2013). We highlight the dialogue of feminist disability studies with Black, intersectional, and decolonial feminisms (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Curiel, 2020), disabled justice (Sins Invalid, 2019), crip theory (Kafer, 2013; McRuer, 2006), and the emancipatory perspective of disability, to conduct studies with people with disabilities and not about them (Moraes, 2022). In line with these theoretical frameworks, we assume that narrating multiple, diverse, and plural stories is part of an ethical-political strategy committed to breaking with the unique and reified history of disability, which associates it with personal tragedy and overcoming.

Therefore, we rely on using narratives to denounce ableism and aim at the visibility of the multiplicity of the experience of disability. We also recognize that this strategy is not intended to transform data into generalizing and universalizing categories. In line with the assumption of feminist disability studies that the personal is political (Garland-Thomson, 2005) and with the Crip Theory that we must crip the social and political context so that disability is not only welcomed but celebrated, we understand the political character of making partial and localized disability experiences visible (Haraway, 1988), in the context of education. In this sense, it should be noted that two of the authors identify as disabled persons: the first author of this paper is autistic and a university professor in Brazil, and the third author identifies as disabled and is a university professor in Canada.

## **Participants**

The narrative corpus of this research brings together 12 interviews with Black disabled women from different regions of Brazil. Participants needed to be women (cis or trans) over 18 years old, have a disability (even if diagnosed in adulthood), identify as Black

(with either black or brown skin), and have attended or completed higher education in Brazil. Although the invitation did not specify the requirement of a link with higher education, all interviewees presented academic trajectories up to this level.

### **Information collection instruments and procedures**

A sociodemographic survey form and an in-depth autobiographical interview were used to obtain the information. The first aimed to gather information from the participants to contemplate the specificities concerning disability and their intersections. Thus, the form included name, sex, age, gender identity, sexual orientation, race, disability, region, religion, education, occupation, income, housing, health services, and social assistance. The purpose of the interviews was to survey the most significant events in the educational trajectories of the participants and their intersections, mainly with ableism, racism, and sexism.

The participants were first recruited through the contact networks of the research authors. The snowball method (Baldin & Munhoz, 2011) was used in addition to disseminating the research in the social networks of the researchers responsible for the study.

The participants answered the sociodemographic questionnaire after reading and signing the Informed Consent Form. The interviews were scheduled according to their availability. Because we were still officially in the COVID-19 pandemic and due to accessibility issues, the interviews were conducted online through the Zoom platform, between 1 h 20 min and 2 h 15 min. A Brazilian Sign Language (libras) interpreter was provided to enable the participation of one of the interviewees who required this resource.

### **Information analysis procedures**

This research used narrative analysis aligned with feminist disability studies and disability studies in education, focusing on the experiences of subjugated groups, such as Black disabled women, whose stories are rarely considered. Gibbs (2018) points out that “by analyzing narratives, stories and biographies we can examine the rhetorical devices that people use and the way they represent and contextualize their experience and personal knowledge” (p. 77)

The narrative is essential to convey experiences. Gibbs (2018) states that “paying attention to why people use a narrative or are telling stories at strategic moments in an interview can give an insight into what are important themes for them and suggest ideas for further investigation” (p. 17) The narratives were grouped by themes based on similarities, avoiding generalizations that erased the specificities of gender, race, and disability in the trajectories of the participants.

The 12 interviews prioritized narratives that evidenced the intersection between ableism and other oppressive systems in higher education. This choice highlights the urgency of considering these intersections in inclusive practices, ensuring that no body or mind is left behind (Sins Invalid, 2019).

### **Ethical procedures**

This research was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the (Federal University of Santa Catarina), CAAE – 59648022.9.0000.0121, Opinion no. 5.478.919. All ethical principles recommended by National Health Council Resolutions 466/12 and 510/2016 have been ensured. The Informed Consent Form, containing

information about the research, was read and signed by all participants. To ensure anonymity, fictitious names were assigned to the research subjects, except three, who requested that they be identified by their first names.

## Results

The narratives of the participants revealed that ableism was widely present in the university, intersecting with racism, sexism, and classism. Below are the three themes that emerged from analyzing the narratives obtained in the research and that show the effects of this intersection.

### **The intersection of sexism, racism, and ableism in maintaining barriers and producing students thought of as “less able”**

The interviewees' narratives showed that they perceived the effects of ableism. Many also noticed its intersection with racism and sexism in academic trajectories, having been thought of as less capable. Some also reported that such intersections delegitimized the demand for accessibility from professors. This paper will provide the most significant narratives that emerged on this theme.

Lúcia, a woman who became a person with physical and psychosocial disabilities during college, realizes that the intersection between gender, race, and disability has the effect of discrediting Black disabled women. She reported that her presence in the undergraduate physics program was often discredited since *“every time I say **physics**, it seems that people hear **physical education**, it seems that people hear anything else”*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Physics is a field dominated by white males in Brazil, while Physical Education, a lower status profession is currently more open to lower-income people (who in Brazil are mostly Black) and women.

(*authors' emphasis*). In Lúcia's narrative, being a person with a disability intersects with gender and race since being a woman and Black in a male-majority program also mixes sexism and racism, blurring the possibility of identifying these markers in the difference. This intersectional violence was even reproduced by students, in phrases like the one a white, non-disabled classmate said to Lúcia: “*Wow! You passed even though I didn't!*” and also by some professors.

They discredit a lot of racialized people, they discredit a lot of women and of all that, so [...] it's [that you need] a voice that you have to shout 4 times louder, that you have to be 98% sure of what you're saying so that you're heard for even a second. So, it's very common [...] even if I had a good performance, [or] something like that, there are people still discrediting, diminishing, and not wanting to be, ah, not listening to my opinion (Lúcia).

Another participant who also had her university experience crossed by the intersection of gender, race, and disability oppressions was Joanna, an autistic woman who began her career at the university studying Medicine. Without completing this degree, she switched to the Computer Engineering program and, after completing this, returned to the Medical program. Her narrative regarding her first period in the Medical Program indicated that she had difficulties adapting to the teaching method (largely based on lectures and memorizing information). The narrative below shows that even though she passed the entrance exam, she did not feel like she belonged to the program. It is evident that race, disability, and, to some extent, gender are articulated, producing the perception that she did not legitimately belong in the Medical program. We understand that she internalized *impostor syndrome*

(Bravata et al., 2020). This is not a pathology but rather feeling affects people crossed by markers of race, gender, and/or social class, based on systemic violence that lead them to feel that they do not belong and do not have enough value to be in the place and/or position they occupy. This self-imposed ableism, racism, and sexism happen when the person internalizes the messages they recurrently receive of not deserving their achievements (Bravata et al., 2020).

Even though I passed the entrance exam, it was like, I don't belong in this group, I don't belong in any sense, I don't know how to interact with people, I don't live the reality they live, I don't look like them, nobody sees me as looking like them, even today, if I walk into a room, I'm a nurse and not the doctor, so, like, I freaked out and said, I'm not going to stay here, I don't want to! (Joana)

This perception of not belonging made her decide to change her undergraduate program to computer engineering. Soon, Joana also found this new environment strange because she was the only woman in the room. She reported that it was common to hear phrases such as: *"You're a woman! You don't know how to program! You have no credibility!"*.

Nevertheless, her with her talents as a student she finished the program.

After finishing the Computer Engineering program, Joana realized that she had dropped out of the Medical program because of the difficulty she had in interactions, which made her return to it. However, the difficulty in learning things by verbal instructions (you need to read to learn) and the difficulties in interactions made her feel incapable. In her words:

I don't learn by listening, so there's no point in you coming to me and saying, look, "when you have a patient like this, you do this, this, this, this." There's no use, so I'd come off as dumb. I, I felt like they were looking at me and saying, "Who is this retard? What are you doing here?" (Joana)

In this excerpt of her narrative, the appropriation of oppression, or the "impostor syndrome", perceived by Joana because of her disability, is explicit. Additionally, there were no Black women in her classroom; she was the only one: *"My first medical class didn't have [affirmative action] quotas, the second class already had quotas, so there were black men, but there were no Black women. Even with the quotas, there were no Black women"* (Joana). Similarly, another participant named, Luciana, who is an amputee, reported that she could not identify peers at scientific events, such as conferences. According to her, *"Every time I arrive at a conference, it is immediate [for me] to scan for Black people. It is, it is automatic: you see how many [...] how many of us are there? three, four?"*

Another participant interviewed was Karla, a blind woman who started her foray into academia in psychology and who was studying social work at the time of our interview. Her journey in her undergraduate studies began at a private psychology college, whose tuition was high. Public universities do not charge tuition in Brazil. Even then, the problem of accessibility continued. However, unlike her previous experiences, in which she managed to learn, this time, Karla could not study without having access to the material with adaptations for a screen reader and failed in two subjects. She was the only blind person in the classroom; there was only one tutor for all the students with disabilities in the college,

and the solution Karla offered for her stay was to take only two classes per semester. Karla indicated that the difficulties she experienced in college were due to “*the weight I carry on my back for being a woman, for being Black, and for being blind*” (Karla).

Ana Maria, a blind woman with an undergraduate degree in pedagogy a master's degree in public policy and a doctorate in psychology, reported that ableism, sometimes intersected with racism, was a constant throughout her training. However, she did not feel sexism as much throughout her career in higher education. She cites an example of her selection process for the master's degree in public policy, in which she was thought of as less capable by the professors who interviewed her. According to her,

when I went to the interview, the examining board started asking the following questions: [...] “How was I going to get there if I couldn't see, how was I going to get there?” Then, “How would I read the texts?” [...] And then they started on this question, how was I going to read, how was I going to participate, how was I going to get there? It was just too much. So I asked: No, I came here for an admissions interview, do you ask this to everyone who is here? How are you going to get here, how are you going to read? “No!” They stood like that, looking at one another like that, very suspicious. “No [...] it's because you have a disability!” (Ana Maria)

Narratives such as those of Lúcia, Joana, Karla, and Ana Maria demonstrate how sexism, racism, and ableism act intersectionally, positioning them as less capable and producing many barriers that hinder the inclusion of women in a university. In our research, we noticed a facet of these exclusion mechanisms when the disability inhabited by some of the women interviewed is not “visible” and is not explicit in their bodies.

### **The invalidation of the status of Black women with invisible disabilities**

The reports of some of the research participants who have so-called “non-apparent” or “invisible disabilities” show that their accessibility demands are even more disregarded. This seems to be related to the stereotype that Black women are physically stronger and, therefore, less likely to develop disabilities and to the association of disabilities, such as autism, with white men or only those people with an immense need for support visibilized. Given this, the demand for accessibility becomes a double challenge that produces “access fatigue” (Konrad, 2021) since, in addition to repeatedly having to fight for their rights, they are faced with the need to prove they are people with disabilities. Such an effort demands greater investment and often causes them to give up or not even try to claim accessibility resources (Price, 2024).

Lúcia, who has a non-visible physical disability, reported that she experienced this difficulty in her program, being very discredited by the professors every time she went to them to request access to classes and materials. Her narrative indicates that some professors acted this way because she did not fit the stereotype of a person with a disability.

I am a Black woman, tall, with a curvy body that, I don't know what, and I also always wear clothes that are a little more flashy, I really like accessories, getting ready to look good and, I don't know what. [...] **it seems that all this is very far from the vision they have of a disabled person, who is an underdog, dying, who can't do anything** [...] it's that very stereotypical view of a poor little thing, right? [...] it is very uncomfortable to go through such situations [request accessibility] because it

always seems that you have to be fighting so that you are not seen as [...] as a liar, as a scammer. [...] (Lúcia)

These barriers resulting from not fitting into the expected corporality of a “person with physical disabilities” were also present in other university spaces, such as the library, which was not built considering the accessibility standards since it is an old building. The only elevator in the library is for the exclusive use of staff and gives access to private spaces on account of important documents that are kept there. However, Lúcia, being registered in the accessibility service of the university, has the right to use it. Still, whenever she wants to, she must ask for permission to use it and be accompanied by an employee. She reported that she loves studying in the library but has already been barred or asked a lot about why she would like to use the elevator:

It's super embarrassing, you feel, it's... like you're wrong, like you want to... benefit from something that you don't deserve, you know? And it's just you wanting to get what you have a right to get. And... many times I've even felt embarrassed about going to... to places like that because I knew that it would be difficult for me, for me to get around, I would have to ask for permission, I would have to keep explaining myself, I could be stopped and... I have been through several very stressful situations like this.

In this sense, we interviewed Helena, an autistic woman education major who, although she had been trying for some time in the diagnostic process, only obtained the medical report that would give her the right to accommodations a few months before the interview she granted us. She reported that, although some professors sought to meet her

accessibility requests throughout her academic career, she experienced a situation in which a professor hinted to the class, when she was not in the room, “[...] *that there were people out there saying that I was autistic to get attention because now autism is in fashion.*”

Luciana, a woman amputee who uses prostheses, often stopped requesting accommodations due to having a disability that was not apparent at first glance, especially when she wore long pants. She went through several episodes in which she was asked why she was using the preferential seat on public transport on the way to the university. At the university, she stopped requesting the repair of the elevator of the building where she studied for fear of not meeting her demands and still being seen as someone who should not be at the university. She reported that one of the difficulties in achieving accessibility is because “*you have to talk about your whole life, right? And to a random person just because [...] things aren’t as they should be.*” According to her, “*if every time you leave the house, you have to fight, it’s better not to leave, then there are things that you push for, [or that] you let go [...].*”

The invalidation of a social marker in people who do not “fit” into pre-established models as legitimate is also shared with brown people<sup>2</sup> in our society. Ana Maria, a blind woman previously presented, reported that her disability, to some extent, was always considered and produced as experiences marked by ableism, which was often internalized. However, her case had her racial status invalidated because she was a light-

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<sup>2</sup> The term *Brown people* was chosen to translate the Portuguese term *pardo*, which refers to Black people with lighter skin.

skinned Black woman. According to her: *“So there was a lot of ‘no.. You're not, you're not Black, no, you're pretty white, you're almost white.’ So people were really wanting us to look like something we weren't.”*

In Brazil, race is articulated along different and less binary lines than in the United States which serves to mask racism (Roth-Gordon, 2016). It is a country where racialized people (Black, Brown, Indigenous, and Quilombola<sup>3</sup>) have the right to affirmative action, denying someone's racial condition can be understood as a way of delegitimizing access to that person's rights. However, such accusations of “not being Black enough” to have rights to affirmative action do not stop these women from living with racism exercised daily against them.

Affirming their marks of difference as part of their identity is subjective. There are many and very diverse ways in which the interviewees in our research report their life experiences and self-identification as women crossed by the intersectionality of race, gender, and disability. Understanding these oppressions as structural, we know, as noted in Price (2024), that it is common for disabled people to end up masking their condition to be accepted or have the right to non-hypervisibility, having to claim the legitimization of

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<sup>3</sup> Following APA guidelines for capitalizing racial and ethnic identities (APA, 2020, Section 5.7), the terms “Brown” and *Quilombola* are also capitalized throughout this text. In the Brazilian context, these are officially recognized racial and ethnoracial categories used in census data, affirmative action policies, and anti-racist advocacy. “Brown” refers to the category “pardo” in Brazil’s racial classification system, while “Quilombola” refers to Afro-Brazilian descendants of maroon communities with legal recognition under Brazilian law. In the Brazilian context skin shade labels are common and specific in that there are, based on USA Today (2014), at least 136 words to describe skin color. This is why Black and Brown are used by participants and researchers in this project as distinct from each other even though they might be considered in the same category (Black) in the US or Canada: because anyone who identifies as of Black African descent —no matter what skin tone —may choose to identify in this way in North America.

their differences exhaustively. We are talking about the right to “not be noticed” and to circulate without always being the hypervisible person. This question will be presented below.

**Masking gender, race, and disability: a strategy to circumvent the ableism present in the university**

The masking of race, disability, and, depending on the program in which the participants are inserted, gender was a strategy commonly used by some of the women interviewed to move in the academic context. We observed instances of both racial and disability masking in our study (Miller et al., 2021). Racial masking is something particularly prevalent in Brazil, even to the extent of cosmetic surgery to change racialized bodily features (Jarrin, 2017).

This strategy seemed to be more often used by women with invisible disabilities, who could choose to reveal their condition. This appears to be related to the discredit they experienced and prevents many from claiming their rights. This is the case of Joana, an autistic woman presented in the previous section who sought to appear white through the hair straightening process. She also sought to mask her autistic characteristics to adapt to the demands of the program and not suffer ableism when she returned to the medicine program. It made her feel closer to the class, as the following excerpt illustrates:

And in the first class, there was me as a Black person, but at that time I straightened my hair, and **when you straighten your hair people perceive you as whiter**, then you see what happens because your hair is straightened, and there was a boy who was, you know, [one of] those dark-skinned with straight hair, Indian type, there,

there were these two people in the class of 50 students, there were two Blacks, and with straight hair (emphasis added).

Beatrice, a 32-year-old woman with an amputated foot, also experienced oppression stemming from the intersection of gender, race, and disability. Although the effects of this intersection were much more intense in basic education, they were still present in the undergraduate program. She reports that the effects of this intersection have been transformed with her political insertion and anti-racist and anti-ableist literacy that she has been studying in her master's degree:

So, I didn't want to be a Black person at all costs. I didn't want to! I always had white people, I wanted white people by my side to really try to whiten myself. I straightened my hair, the first opportunity I had to straighten my hair, I straightened my hair. Yes! From, in adolescence onwards, right? From the age of 15, 16, I didn't want to be a person... a, a Black person, right? I really wanted to be a white person, so I tried all the time to be a white person. [...] Professors don't remember me when I was an undergraduate, because I hid myself to the extreme, right? I didn't tell people that I was a disabled person, that I was ashamed [...] I didn't accept my [natural] hair [...]. It was straightened, right?

It was during her master's degree that Beatriz gained access to anti-racist and anti-ableist literacy, which contributed to her first assuming herself as a Black woman and then as a person with disabilities. In her words: *"It was a very liberating process, right? It was such a game changer in my life, to get closer to the aesthetics of Black people, [...] to understand and accept myself as a disabled person."*

Joseane, an autistic woman who started her academic career in the industrial design program and then transferred to the environmental management program, reported how much she had to mask autism to adjust to social demands. She also sometimes suffered gender discrimination because she presented behavior considered masculinized, but this was in secondary education. She felt like “the stranger in the class” during her undergraduate studies. She sought strategies to be minimally included and felt more comfortable with playful people (because she knew the person was joking). She realized she had a hard time with social conventions. She noticed herself making a great effort to imitate people's behaviors in the different spaces she circulated throughout life, among them at the university.

It's just that I masked a lot, so I imitated a lot, to society! [...To adapt, I had to imitate a lot. I imitated people a lot, because I saw, I noticed that pattern that: Ah! The right thing is to do it that. So I'm going to do this, because if everyone does it, then I'm going to do it! And then I lost myself, right? Who is Joseane really?

Vanessa, a prosthesis user who was a student in the economic sciences program, also reported that she felt the need to mask her disability. She sought to use the prosthesis even when it was hurting a lot, and she sought excellent academic results.

I worried a lot, and I don't want people to think that I am... that I'm difficult, or that... I'm a nuisance, I want... I really had a need to belong in that space and to be welcomed by people for exactly the... process that I was coming through, that I had gone through in high school. And then... in college, the hardest part for me was the prosthetics, which hurt a lot. So people always ask, “ah, and have you adapted?” I

said, “No, I made myself adapt,” because I used fancy bandages to keep from hurting myself, it hurt anyway, I used so much adhesive tape because I am allergic, even hyper allergenic ones, my skin was raw. [...].

Ana Maria also often felt the need to overcome the disability in her academic trajectory, showing herself capable. Some moments of her narrative highlight the intersection with race, mainly as a result of her experiences in basic education, where they repeatedly tried to whiten her disability, and the ableism resulting from it generated many attempts to mask it in the direction of proving to be capable. According to her, the academic context presents *“the need for us to appear normative.”* This is because *“anyone who has a disability really wants to look like they don't have one. At that time, I didn't think that was it, I had no idea what it was. But today, I really understand, like, wanting to do what everyone else did.”* We end this theme by presenting the results of Ana Maria's report on the challenge of assuming disability in a university:

We are ashamed of being different because you can't do it the way someone else does because you can't be in that place easily as someone else seems to be, you feel a lot, it's like [...] wanting to learn first, do first, test first. [...] I think disability imposes many things on those who have it, many things to make it seem like you don't have it, many things of wanting others to think that you can do more than they think, you know, prove that you can do more [...].

## Discussion

The narratives of the participants in this study showed that the intersection between gender, race, and disability negatively affects the experience of Black disabled women in higher education. This intersection contributes to Black disabled women being read as less capable. It hinders the claim of accessibility already legally provided in Brazil for students with disabilities at all levels of education. It is important to highlight that disability based on the biomedical model as an individual problem, reinforced by the neoliberal policies highly present in universities (Brown, 2020), tends to hold the individual responsible for the search for means (services and accessibility devices) to study at a university. These findings are consistent with research analyzing the effects of the intersectionality of disability with other forms of oppression (Bailey & Mobley, 2019; Beche & Mendes, 2023; Brown et al., 2021; Lorandi & Gesser, 2023; Price, 2024; Singer & Bacon, 2020). Racialized people and, depending on the program chosen, women (Gesser et al., 2024) are delegitimized at university.

The narratives from the participants also indicate that the intersection of disability with gender and race contributed to masking these social markers. This masking occurs through the reproduction of ableism, seeking to “overcome disability” at any cost, showing that they are capable, which was accentuated in cases where their programs were for professions considered masculine. The reproduction of whiteness was also observed through straightening hair to become invisible regarding race. Nishida (2016) discusses how trying to survive as a student within academia can exacerbate existing disability and can even cause new disability. We certainly observed the harm our participants experienced when they sought to conform to ableist and racial standards within academia.

In addition to receiving racist and ableist messages, they experienced internalized ableism or imposter syndrome (Bravata et al., 2020), as can be observed in the narratives of Lúcia, Joana, Karla, Beatriz, Ana Maria, Vanessa, and Joseane. *Impostor syndrome* (Bravata et al., 2020) refers to a feeling that affects people who are crossed by markers of race, gender, and/or social class. It is a reaction to structural violence within the institution that makes them feel that they do not belong, and that they are not worth being where they are and/or in their position. This self-imposed ableism, racism, and sexism happen when the person internalizes the messages they recurrently receive of not deserving their achievements (Bravata et al., 2020). In a racist, sexist, and ableist context, seeking to reproduce whiteness (straightening hair) and ability (masking disability and seeking to show that they are capable of studying subjects traditionally considered masculine), it is more than understandable to want to be in that context without being so subjugated (Gesser et al., 2022; Jarrin 2017; Miller et al., 2021).

In addition, the narratives showed that participants with invisible disabilities faced more barriers to claiming accessibility, increasing access fatigue. This concept refers to “the everyday pattern of needing to help others participate in access, a demand so taxing and relentless that, at times, it makes access simply not worth the effort” (Konrad, 2021, p. 180). In Brazil, diagnoses such as autism are often associated with white men, which leads to the discrediting of women’s accessibility needs, as indicated in studies on the masculinization of autism (Grinker, 2007). In addition, Black women, often seen as stronger and more resistant to pain (Bailey & Mobley, 2019), face greater difficulty in

claiming architectural accessibility, especially in cases of less evident physical disabilities, as demonstrated in Lúcia's narrative.

Inspired by crip theory (Kafer, 2013; McRuer, 2006;), we conclude by emphasizing the need to “crip” universities so that they not only meet accessibility demands but desire and anticipate the presence of people with disabilities and other differences in the academic environment (Mozzi, 2024). Connor (2013) defines “cripping,” from critical perspectives of Disability Studies, as recognizing disability as part of human variation, offering “opportunities for all of us to rethink how we interpret and place meaning on human differences, and the profound implications this has for students” (p. 124). We understand “cripping” as breaking with ableist times, spaces, and relationships intersected by other oppressive systems, a crucial step in promoting social justice in education.

### **Final Remarks**

This study revealed how the intersection of ableism with sexism and racism positions Black disabled women as less capable at universities and makes it difficult for them to claim access, which is accentuated when their disabilities are invisible. Finally, it was possible to identify when the intersection between ableism with sexism and racism contributed to the participants seeking to mask disability (and, in some situations, race and characteristics often associated with women) as a strategy to seek recognition of legitimacy to be in a university. Thus, acting together, these oppression systems help maintain ableism within the academy and the privilege of those considered capable.

It is worth noting that this intersectional oppression is experienced in a context that values the biomedical perspective, which relates disability as a personal tragedy and reproduces the neoliberal perspective that overvalues competition, productivity, and individualism. This scenario makes the women interviewed responsible for seeking access and tends to delegitimize them even if they meet what the academy expects.

The results indicate the need for Brazilian universities to incorporate an intersectional perspective in their accessibility policies since the intersection between ableism, sexism, and racism hinders access claims, producing access fatigue. Thus, it will be possible to implement the rights provided through Brazilian legislation (i.e., Law No. 13,146 of July 6th, 2015) to ensure the access and permanence of disabled students in higher education. In addition, it indicates the importance of feminist disability studies in professors' initial and continuing education and that the intersectional perspective should be incorporated into social research and practice.

This research presents many contributions to understanding the academic trajectories of Black disabled women. The intersectional analytical perspective through the visibility of these women's stories enriches the path toward social justice. However, this study also presents some limitations, such as data collection difficulties during the COVID-19 pandemic. This meant that the interviews were performed remotely. The restricted movement and realities of online university instruction may also have caused difficulties in recruitment. It is also possible that the pressures to whiten, mask, and experience the imposter syndrome may have discouraged people from joining the study.

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