

The logo for the Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) is displayed in a large, white, serif font on a black, tilted rectangular background.The text "ON THE CUTTING EDGE" is written in a white, serif font on a black rectangular background.

Putting (Dis)Ability Back Into Black History Month

by Lissa D. Stapleton, Ph.D.
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Carter Godwin Woodson, the father of Black History, created Negro History Week in 1926, and February 2019 signifies the 93rd year of holding space, celebrating Black achievement, reflecting on past and current struggles, and bringing Black life to the forefront. I will be the first to say that Black excellence and life should be celebrated year-round and that Black History Month is an important opportunity to focus on counterstories or more holistic Black centered and led perspectives on what we believe are important contributions. As a teacher and scholar, my research is interdisciplinary, and I generally explore the educational experiences, access, and equity for Deaf¹ Students of Color, specifically Black Deaf communities. My current research explores historical connections between Black Deaf education and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). The more time I spend in the archives of HBCUs like Hampton University and Southern University A&M, the more I find interesting hidden facts about the intertwined relationships of Black hearing and Deaf communities.

This type of Black history is often untold and has been erased from our history books and the consciousness of what we share with young people. We know that all Black people are not the same, but the way we teach about Black people, our lives, our successes, and our struggles often erases the complex, rich, and diverse lived experiences and identities of Black communities, specifically when it comes to disability and Deaf communities. Approximately 14.2% (5 million) of Black people within the U.S. reported having a disability (Yang & Tan, 2018), so how are people with disabilities² represented within Black History Month? Disabled and Deaf communities are often understood and remembered from a color-blind ideology, or more appropriately, a color-evasive ideology, or a lack of acknowledgment of race (Annamma, Jackson, & Morrison, 2017). In addition, Black communities are often essentialized and homogeneity is assumed (i.e., same ethnicities, culture, social class, ability, upbringings, and spiritual beliefs).

Color-evasiveness and essentialism happens in two ways. Either race and ethnicity are erased from how we understand disability, thus labeling disabled communities as only White identities; or disability is erased from how we remember and share about Black people, thus making the assumption that all Black people are able-bodied, neurotypical, and hearing. Black History Month is a time to remember important people and events in Black history, but what happens when we only celebrate certain aspects of those events and people? All students, specifically Black students, do not get to learn or fully appreciate diverse and complex lived experiences of Black life. Black students with disabilities never get an opportunity to see themselves or the success of people like them in history.

This year and every Black History Month, I encourage you to seek out, celebrate, and remember Deaf and disabled people when creating activities, looking for presenters, expanding your curriculum, and recommending books. Black disabled and Deaf lives matter in February and year round. Let's celebrate, embrace, remember, and hold space for all aspects of Black excellence.

¹ The word "Deaf" is referring to all individuals that identify as Deaf, hard of hearing, DeafBlind, and late-deafened and is used as the preferred term for individuals who identify as Deaf but not disabled.

² To honor multiple identities and evolving labels, I use disabled and people with disabilities interchangeably.

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Putting (Dis)Ability Back Into Black History Month References

- Annamma, S. A., Jackson, D. D., & Morrison, D. (2017). Conceptualizing color-evasiveness: Using dis/ability critical race theory to expand a color-blind racial ideology in education and society. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 20(2), 147-162.
- Yang, L. K., & Tan, H. E. (2018). *Institute on Employment and Disability: Disability statistics*. Retrieved from <http://disabilitystatistics.org/reports/acs.cfm?statistic=1>

Want to Learn More? Check Out These Resources

There are several well known Black heroes and sheroes who have a disability and or are Deaf, including Harriett Tubman (abolitionist/epileptic), Claudia Gordon (lawyer/Deaf), Muhammad Ali (world champion boxer/dyslexic), and Leroy Moore Jr. (artist/activist/cerebral palsy) to just name a few). Check out the following resources for additional information:

Respect Ability: Fighting Stigmas. Advancing Opportunities

Highlighting African Americans with Disabilities in Honor of Black History Month

<https://www.respectability.org/2018/02/highlighting-african-americans-disabilities-honor-black-history-month/>

The Body is Not An Apology

14 Black Disabled Women Who Made a Powerful Impact In Life & Self Love

<https://thebodyisnotanapology.com/magazine/14-black-disabled-women-reminding-us-of-our-power/>

Carter G. Woodson - African American Trailblazers

History of Black History Month with captions

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jkBEjJH1j5U>

Ramp Your Voice with Vilissa

<http://rampyourvoice.com>

Krip Hop Nation

<https://kriphopnation.com>

National Black Disability Coalition

<https://www.blackdisability.org>

National Black Deaf Advocates

<https://www.nbda.org>

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