

BI(ac/ea)kness in Disability: The Intersectionality of Race and Disability

The distinction between disability and impairment has emerged as one of the most provocative and significant areas of discussion in contemporary critical theory, particularly because disability does not exist in isolation but intersects with multiple social constructs such as race, caste, class, gender, and sexuality. While impairment refers to a bodily or cognitive condition, disability is produced through social, cultural, and political structures that determine whose bodies and minds are considered normative. Much like traditional Miltonian criticism has historically failed to adequately address the implications of John Milton's blindness on his literary production and self-representation, critical race studies have often overlooked how disability operates simultaneously as a metaphor and as a literal embodied identity. This critical gap becomes especially apparent when examining the experiences of Black disabled bodies, which are frequently erased or oversimplified within both disability studies and race theory. Tyehimba Jess's poem *Leadbelly* (2005) intervenes in this omission by engaging with political consciousness and critical expansiveness through the figures of Jefferson and Leadbelly, foregrounding the entangled realities of race, disability, incarceration, and artistic expression.

The central argument of this study is grounded in the positionality of disabled people of color and the ways in which ableism and racism intersect to produce distinct and compounded forms of discrimination, marginalization, and social restriction. These overlapping systems of oppression do not merely coexist but actively reinforce one another, creating conditions in which Black disabled individuals are subjected to heightened surveillance, exclusion, and dehumanization. Such strategic exclusion is often justified through notions of essentiality and normalcy constructed by ableist and racist power structures, with the explicit aim of maintaining socially engineered hierarchies and controlling access to resources, mobility, and recognition. By examining how bodily difference has historically been linked to moral, intellectual, and racial inferiority, the study reveals how disability has been weaponized to legitimize structural inequality. It further explores the interlocking relationship between premodern and contemporary conceptions of bodily and intellectual integrity, demonstrating how these frameworks continue to shape modern systems of oppression within racist, sexist, and ableist societies.

Methodologically, the study employs close textual analysis of Tyehimba Jess's *Leadbelly* alongside related critical and literary works that engage with race, disability, and representation. It draws upon essays and scholarship by critics such as Willene Pulliam Taylor and Dennis Taylor, as well as foundational literary interventions like Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark*, which interrogates the construction of Blackness within American literary imagination. Additionally, the study references Gordon Parks's 1976 cinematic production *Leadbelly*, a biographical portrayal of the blues musician Huddie Ledbetter, upon which Jess's poem is partially based. By situating Jess's poetic narrative within this broader intertextual and cultural framework, the paper aims to illuminate how Black disability is articulated, resisted, and reimagined in literature and popular culture, ultimately arguing for a more inclusive and intersectional understanding of disability that fully acknowledges the lived realities of race and embodiment.