

Disabled and Racialized Musicians: Experiences and Epistemologies

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Abstract

Drawing on DisCrit—disability studies and critical race theory (Annamma, Ferri, and Connor 2013) and Beaudry's (2020) framework for accounts of disability, we (the authors) examine the lived experiences of Jason and Gift as disabled and racialized musicians. Echoing the DisCrit maxim that ableism and racism are intertwined, we assert that, like disability studies in general, disability research in music education is characterized by unmarked whiteness (Bell 2006, 2011). As a result, disability research in music education has a deep deficit of epistemologies of disabled and racialized people. To address this issue, we adhere to the fourth tenet of DisCrit by centering the perspectives of disabled and racialized people, presenting the experiences of Jason and Gift with music teaching and learning in the form of conversational interviews.

Keywords

Disability, race, music education, disability studies, critical race theory, DisCrit, disability epistemology

What do Sandra Bland, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, Tanisha Anderson, Deborah Danner, Ezell Ford, Alfred Olango and Keith Lamont Scott all have in common? They were all black Americans who died at the hands of the police or in police custody. And they were all also disabled. (Bradley and Katz 2020).

The call for this special issue of *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* foregrounds racism, but as the aforementioned quote suggests, it is important to take into account the intersections of people’s complex identities and lived experiences. Consider the sobering reality that in the United States, Black people with disabilities experience the highest cumulative probability of arrest while White, nondisabled people experience the lowest (McCauley 2017). To many in the disability community, this reality is not a revelation. Following the killing of George Floyd at the hands of the Minneapolis Police and the ensuing worldwide protests, Jennifer Johnson-White (2020), a Black neurodiverse designer, reflected:

as footage of the uprisings around the nation and the world began to flood my social media feeds, I felt emotionally exhausted by the weight of seeing Black and brown bodies murdered by the people meant to protect us. I also felt exhausted knowing that Black disabled bodies would be excluded from the conversations around police brutality that were arising out of the protests. (Paragraph 1)

In response, Johnson-White created the Black Disabled Lives Matter graphic (Fig. 1):

I created a graphic that merged the Black power fist—the historic symbol of solidarity and power, which was used by Black revolutionary disabled activists like Fannie Lou Hamer and Brad Lomax—with the neurodiversity infinity symbol to convey the message that Black Disabled Lives Matter. I posted it to social media, writing in the caption, “True advocates and allies please take note: To be Pro Neurodiversity is to be Anti-Racist.” (Johnson-White 2020, Paragraph 4).



Johnson-White reminds readers that racism delves deeper than the dermis, systematically sifting bodyminds¹ based on other attributes (i.e., neurodiversity) in the pursuit of power. There are countless categories by which to classify bodies based on the construct of race. Hamraie (2017) asserts: “Disability and race are hardly discrete categories...racial difference is often marked by perceptions of disability and defect, and markers of infirmity or poor health have been used to justify racism against communities of color” (72). Yet, as school boards, colleges, universities, and other umbrella organizations of music education have made their pledges to be anti-racist, they often omit, and thereby erase, disability. Too often, disability is the last label in a long list of ways to be oppressed. Too often, disability is the last identity considered in intersectionality. Chris Bell (2011) makes the point in his introduction to *Blackness and Disability*:

Too much critical work in Disability Studies is concerned with [W]hite bodies: “Disability Studies, while not wholeheartedly excluding people of color from its critique, by and large focuses on [W]hite individuals and is itself largely produced by corps of [W]hite scholars and activists.” (275).

More recent monographs offer evidence of a growing consciousness regarding the pervasive and presumed whiteness of disability history. For example, in the realm of design, Williamson (2019) documents a thorough account of the development of accessibility in the United States as one in which there are tiers of privilege for people with disabilities based on their race. The legacy of the White male war veteran as the most deserving of accessibility persists to the present. Similarly, Hamraie (2017) discusses how design standards for built environments are based on a “mythic average norm”—akin to Garland-Thomson’s (1997) “normate”—“a particular [W]hite, European, nondisabled, youthful, and often masculine figure whose features remain unmarked” (20). “Mythic” is apt, because as Rose (2016) details, the construct of average was devised by Quetelet and revised by Galton in the nineteenth century, and by the early twentieth century, “the notion that people could be sorted into distinct bins of ability from low to high had infiltrated virtually all the social and behavioral sciences” (34). For over a hundred years, Western societies have been ruled in more ways than one (i.e., measured and controlled) by the logic of the bell curve:

An important consequence of the idea of the norm is that it divides the total population into standard and nonstandard subpopulations. The next step in conceiving of the population as norm and non-norm is for the state to attempt to norm the nonstandard—the aim of eugenics. Of course, such an activity is profoundly

paradoxical since the inviolable rule of statistics is that all phenomena will always conform to a bell curve. (Davis 2006, 6)

Paradoxical indeed when one confronts the reality of the so-called statistical anomaly that more than one billion (13.5%) of the world's population is disabled, plus the parallel certainty that an unknown but assuredly large proportion of the population do not disclose their impairments out of fear of stigmatization or discrimination (Riddle 2020, 229). Using the United States as an example, the fear of ableism, which is difficult to discern from racism, is well warranted given ableism's aim of annihilation. Dolmage (2018) details how at Ellis Island, a "heterotopia of deviation," immigrants were inspected and marked, initially with labels such as "LPC" (likely to become a public charge) or worse (e.g., "moron," "feebleminded"),

conveniently extracting (or manufacturing) from the stream of newcomers a range of dark, disabled, sexually ambiguous others who, when marked out, allowed a [W]hite, Western European, heteronormative, and normal, able (and wholly fictional) American body to rise out of the negative space. (28–29)

Influential on this immigration policy was Charles Davenport's *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics* (1911), in which he expressed his concern that,

the population of the United States will, on account of the great influx of blood from South-Eastern Europe, rapidly become darker in pigmentation, smaller in stature, more mercurial, more attached to music and art, more given to crimes of larceny, kidnapping, assault, murder, rape, and sex-immorality" (219 as cited in Dolmage 2018, 35).

Present statistics suggest that Davenport's demonization of disabled and racialized people still pervades. A recent research brief from the National Disability Institute (2020) reports:

Black Americans are three times as likely to die at the hands of police and 2.5 times as likely to die at the hands of COVID-19 than [W]hite Americans. These injustices also unduly affect Americans with disabilities. In relation to the pandemic, individuals with disabilities are overly represented in the lives lost due to COVID-19. Those that remain healthy have been disproportionately affected by job loss... Among BIPOC² Americans with disabilities, 35 percent lost their jobs. (1–2)

The report reveals several statistics that highlight the staggering inequality experienced by disabled and racialized people in the United States:

- Black and Indigenous people with disabilities have the highest poverty rates, 36% and 34%, respectively (4);

- compared to non-Hispanic Whites, all racial/ethnic minorities with disabilities have lower levels of educational attainment (5);
- Black and Latinx people with disabilities account for the lowest percentage of people who save for unexpected expenses (6);
- Black householders with disabilities have the lowest net worth (7);
- More than 50% of Black and Latinx households with a disability spend more than 30% of their income on housing (8); and,
- Black people with disabilities have experienced the highest rate of job loss amidst the pandemic, 44% (9).

In their earlier report based on census data from 2015, “Financial Inequality: Disability, Race, and Poverty in America” (Goodman, Morris, and Boston 2017), the National Disability Institute asserts, “Race and disability are overlapping identities that are both related to systemic inequality” (5). The report details that the prevalence of disability is highest amongst Black people in the United States, 14%, who are also the worst positioned with regards to metrics assessing education, poverty, employment, banking status, medical debt and health insurance, and food security. As these figures make clear, disabled and racialized people experience compounded oppression, which only increases as other minoritized identity intersections are included in the inequity equation. In short, “racism validates and reinforces ableism, and ableism validates and reinforces racism” (Annamma, Connor, and Ferri 2013, 13).

Bell (2006, 2011) and other scholars (e.g., Annamma, Connor, and Ferri 2013; Bailey and Mobley 2019; Dunham et al. 2015) contend that Disability Studies has continually failed to recognize its pervasive whiteness—in both the researchers and their subjects—and as a result has normed the disabled body as White. “DisCrit”—Disability Studies and Critical Race Theory—coined by Annamma, Connor, and Ferri (2013) and developed into an edited book (Connor, Ferri, and Annamma 2016), examines a number of issues at the intersections of disability and race in education. For example, Thorius and Tan (2016) adapt the concept of educational debt (Ladson-Billings 2006) to DisCrit. They aver that people with intersecting identities in disability, race, and class have accumulated compounded educational debt from four distinct sources: historical debt from being denied access to education; economic debt due to funding disparities; socio-political debt stemming from exclusion from civic life, which is essential in shaping education policy; and moral debt from forced institutionalization and sterilization. Considering the staggering

educational debt inherited by disabled and racialized students, it is sadly not surprising that they are overrepresented in special education services (Ahram, Fergus, and Noguera 2011) and siphoned into the school-to-prison pipeline of the United States (Adams and Erevelles 2016).

These problems extend to music education, too, best summed up in the reflection of Leroy Moore, Jr. (2012), founder of Krip-Hop Nation:

Where were the other people who looked like me as a Black disabled young man? With this continuous question of race and disability along with my love of poetry and music, I started to question the arena of music and performance around the representation of musicians with disabilities, especially disabled musicians of color. (Paragraph 1)

As a field, music education has yet to demonstrate much awareness or produce self-critical accounts of its practices and research that disconnect disability from race and ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, age, and other identity constructions and lived experiences. Most of the discipline's disability research is performed by White nondisabled people on, as opposed to with, disabled but otherwise unmarked White people³; race remains an afterthought. Nondisabled narrators of the lived experiences of people with disabilities are problematic because they have a dearth of disability epistemology. Impairment informs ways of experiencing and knowing that nondisabled people lack (Barnes 2016, Scully 2020). In short, music education researchers, knowingly or unknowingly, subscribe to the mythic average norm and have yet to confront this truth, let alone seek reconciliation with the diverse peoples who constitute the disability community.

Rebuke is warranted, but both disabled and racialized coauthors of this article expressed to their nondisabled White coauthor that our collective focus ought to do more than point out problems within music education. While this sentiment should not be conflated with diminishing the deficits we detail, it highlights the need for a new approach to disability research in music education: a paradigm that places a premium on the experiences and epistemologies of people with disabilities. Toward this end, we proceed by explaining our approach and theoretical framework before presenting the perspectives of Jason and Gift, each replete with their respective experiences that simultaneously evidence their epistemologies.

Constructivist Conversations

adam (nondisabled White man) met both Jason (mixed race blind man) and Gift (Black disabled man) at the same venue but on different dates while attending Drake Music Lab (DMLab) in London, UK. DMLab is a UK-based charity with locations in London and Manchester that “bring Disabled musicians and technologists together to dream up new ways to make music” (Drake Music n.d.). Prior to the onset of the pandemic, DMLab hosted monthly meetings in London that featured guest talks, accessible musical instrument demonstrations, and performances. Each of us had presented and/or performed at DMLab London, which is how we were initially introduced to each other. adam followed up with Jason and Gift about the prospect of interviewing and authoring together to which both agreed. The interviews were approached as constructivist conversations (Brinkmann and Kvale 2014). Jason and Gift were interviewed separately by adam who suggested some topics to guide the conversations with the intent of highlighting the lived experiences of Jason and Gift as disabled and racialized musicians. Approved by the University of Calgary’s research ethics board, the recorded conversations were facilitated through Zoom and transcribed by adam. In reviewing the transcripts of the conversations, our aim was to ensure that each author’s words and intentions were honored. From the transcripts we extracted conversational excerpts and organized them into themes, focusing on Jason’s and Gift’s shared and differing experiences related to disability, race, and music education. To situate and appreciate these conversations, they need to be contextually framed. As a necessary step in this direction, we proceed with a discussion about disability studies as it relates to music education.

Theoretical Framework: Disability Studies and Music Education

We laud music education researchers’ increased immersion in disability studies over the past few years and implore readers to engage with their scholarship (Churchill and Laes 2020; Thumlert and Nolan 2020; Rathgeber 2019), but maintain that the field still has much to learn from disability studies. Our aim here is to avoid an exhaustive overview of this interdisciplinary field and instead speak to a few touchstone ideas that inform our framing of disability and to provide some orientation for the subsequent conversational sections.

Beaudry (2020) outlines a helpful framework for navigating accounts of disability (oftentimes referred to as “models” in disability studies), which is premised on the idea that “polysemy is a philosophically interesting feature of disability” (5). Beaudry poses five categories that “define disability in ways that deny, transcend, or embrace its polysemy” (5): Determinate accounts that are *reductionist* or *mixed*; second-order accounts that are open-ended with regard to *referents* and/or *value*; and *radically open-ended accounts*. We suggest that music education would do well to move toward the radical but at present is rooted primarily in determinate accounts.

Determinate Reductionist Accounts

Most people in Western societies are born under the hegemony of the bell curve (Davis 2006). Our first moments of existence are marked by measurement and from then on, we are reared in a realm of normed standards that dictate, or at least direct, decisions for our lives. Norms can be helpful, but they can also be used to oppress people, especially disabled and racialized people. Human societies have long evidenced beliefs in lesser bodies (Nielsen 2012; Snyder and Mitchell 2006; Stiker 1997), but under the veil of math and science, statistics have been wielded to rationalize ableism and racism, amongst other prejudices. As a default setting, societies that subscribe to statistical norms medicalize disability—that is, they employ sorting and ranking to determine whose bodies are normal or not, thereby producing disability as a diagnosis. Oliver and Barnes (2012) assert that the foundation for the individualizing (or medicalizing) of disability is capitalism:

We would suggest that the gradual creation of this disabled individual occurred at a particular historical point, namely, the coming of industrial society. The collective labour of agrarian society gave way to the individualized wage labor of the factory, fundamentally changing all other social relationships as well. From this point on people with functional limitations become a problem for government because often they were not able to operate the new machinery on which industrial society was being built, nor were their family to support them, being under severe pressure themselves. There followed the long process of constructing what was essentially a labor market issue into an individualized medical problem. (16)

By delineating impairment from disability, Oliver and Barnes (2012) emphasize that disability is the social experience of people with impairments (physical, mental, or intellectual) who encounter economic, environmental, and cultural bar-

riers. This form of discrimination makes one disabled, as disabilities are distributed by society. This way of thinking is congruous with the disability rights movement, which reached a critical mass by the late 1970s in both the United Kingdom and the United States. Since this time, the social model has developed in opposition to the individual (or medical) model. Both are determinate reductionist accounts with concrete conceptions of what constitutes disability and who has responsibility for it (i.e., the individual vs. society).

Whereas medical model thinking remains embedded in societal systems, often covertly, social model thinking positions itself as the resistance to these oppressive systems. For music educators, we suggest that engagement with social model thinking is critically important. Educators reflecting and acting upon the systems in which they participate to make them less disabling can potentially be emancipatory for disabled people. Grappling with the basic idea that educators can make or dismantle disabling environments—musical or otherwise—is an important one and deserves to be foregrounded in professional practice. At present, however, most music education practices skew toward medical model thinking (Bell 2017).

Determinate Mixed Accounts

The benefit of the medical and social models of disability is that they are simple and relatively easy to grasp and explain. But human existence is not simple and is therefore not very compatible with either-or models. Real life experiences of people with disabilities illustrate shortcomings with medical and social model thinking. Therefore, the next logical step is toward a mixed model, and specifically, we will briefly examine the interactional model forwarded by Shakespeare (2013). Shakespeare contends that the “strong social model” frames disability as having nothing to do with the body. His critiques of Oliver and Barnes (2012) are too numerous to detail here, but an important insight offered is that “the social and biological are always entwined” (22). Shakespeare downplays thought experiments and cultural studies, both widely practiced in disabilities studies, in favor of qualitative research studies with disabled people because they reveal that impairment and disability are not dichotomous (25), and that “disability is a complex interaction of biological, psychological, cultural and socio-political factors, which cannot be extricated except with imprecision” (26). The interactional model makes space for more nuanced thinking about disability. It provides a means with which to explain embodied pain and simultaneously champion disability rights. In essence, it

expands on an either-or dichotomy to include an intermediary area, and a rather large one at that. But by bridging the social and medical models, the interactional model opens up disability studies to renewed concerns and critiques about devaluing disabled people. Shakespeare (2013) made clear that barring oppression, “it would still be problematic to have an impairment, because many impairments are limiting or difficult, not neutral” (29). Put simply, disability could be bad. Understandably, this concession has been contested.

Second-Order Open-Ended Accounts with Referents and/or Values

Shakespeare’s (2013) interactional model re-opened a door that the social model had previously closed: the idea of impairment as a negative. Elizabeth Barnes (2016) forwarded that “disability is *neutral* with respect to well-being” (54); and as a result, “having a disability makes you physically non-standard, but it doesn’t (by itself or automatically) make you worse off” (55). Barnes labels this thinking a mere-difference view, likening disability to other identities such as gender or ethnicity: “Being disabled is simply something that makes you a minority—it is a way of having a *minority body*” (78). Beaudry (2020) explains that Barnes’s account employs second-order open-ended thinking that relies on referents not determined by first-order criteria such as diagnoses of disability (individual/medical) or discrimination against impairments (social). Instead, disability is determined by in-members—other disabled people—who act as gatekeepers. Barnes (2016) explains:

Whether someone is disabled is not merely a matter of how they are treated or how they self-identify. It’s a matter of whether they in fact have particular objective bodily features. But the fact that these bodily features are important to us—the fact that they matter, and are considered relevant to the classification of someone as disabled—is due to the way we think about bodies, rather than some objective similarity between such bodies. And that’s what it is, in my view, for disability to be socially constructed. (38)

Barnes’s (2016) philosophy of the minority body has been scrutinized by her peers for its fallibility. For example, Bickenbach (2020) takes issue with the disconnect between disability and health, but Barnes deserves credit for helping to steer the conversation to “allow for the same disability referent to be valued positively, neutrally, or negatively depending on the context” (Beaudry 2020, 13). The ramifications for this line of thinking in music are altogether profound and practical. Lubet’s (2010) concept of “social confluence” is a prime example of a music-

based context-dependent approach that poses some thought-provoking real-world questions about what constitutes disability in music. Other examples of such thinking are largely absent in related works on music performance studies, which tend to subscribe to determinate accounts of disability (e.g., Howe et al. 2015).

Radical Open-Ended Accounts

Beaudry (2020) contends that even open-ended accounts may be exclusive by not welcoming some human differences, and therefore a radical approach that resists determinacy is needed:

Radically open-ended understandings of disability do not necessarily abandon the concept of “disability” but instead encourage its adherents to (1) specify the particular meaning or referent they have in mind while (2) remaining aware that disability’s pluralistic and fluctuating nature can encapsulate a variety of ethical problems and (3) consider whether different referents could be compatible instead of contradictory in the case at hand. They also (4) encourage disability theorists and practitioners to cultivate a critical distance from the concept of disability, even as they deploy it to achieve desirable ends. This critical distance requires awareness that the very use of “disability” risks reasserting the problematic ideologies, affects, and conceptual and psychosocial imaginaries upon which the concept (perhaps inevitably) rests. (14)

For those accustomed to determinate accounts, radical accounts may be challenging to accept or clearly comprehend. Understandably, it can be unsettling to unseat a taken-for-granted frame of reference. When the societies in which people live have conditioned them to have expectations regarding which referents and values are associated with the construct of disability and they are abruptly upended, it can produce cognitive dissonance. We suggest that as can be the case in music, dissonance can be a welcomed experience but may require a period of adjustment.

Our approach is unorthodox in a few ways. First, approaching disability from a music-first perspective without determinate accounts of disability is not widely practiced in academic music disciplines, music education or otherwise. We use music-making contexts as the primary frame of reference to discuss disability and are open to the varied possibilities of (1) what constitutes a referent of impairment and/or disability (depending on how they are conceptualized) in music, and (2) its associated values, be they positive, negative, or seemingly neutral. Second, we cannot deny the existing identities and experiences of Jason and Gift as disabled and racialized people. Approaching disability from the perspectives of musicians—disabled and racialized musicians—makes clear some intersecting identity referents

and also signifies their value. We assert the value of disability epistemology—the idea that disabled people experience and therefore know the world differently than nondisabled people—and apply it to music teaching and learning. We also acknowledge Bell’s (2006) accurate renaming of disability studies to “[W]hite disability studies” as a call to channel the fourth tenet of DisCrit by centering the stories of disabled and racialized people (Annamma, Connor, and Ferri 2013). Jason and Gift are real people, not thought experiments. Their respective complex identities co-exist and intermingle and cannot be parsed out from each other. They are not just disabled people or racialized people; they are disabled *and* racialized people all at once.

Experiences and Epistemologies of Jason and Gift

In this section, we consciously choose to limit the degree to which we guide the reader’s thinking in advance of the transcribed conversations between the authors. Our aim is for the reader to encounter the experiences of Jason and Gift just as they are, with minimal framing, to consider how they (mis)align with their own experiences of music teaching and learning. We do, however, provide some scaffolding in the form of organized themes with introductory remarks intended to serve as *thinking nudges*—gentle prompts to initially orient and guide the reader before they wade into the wellsprings of Jason’s and Gift’s commentaries. Ultimately, we ask, what can music education learn from the experiences of disabled and racialized musicians? What do Jason’s and Gift’s respective epistemologies, shaped by their lived experiences as disabled and racialized people, have to offer music education?

Preamble: Disability Identity

As a necessary preamble, we share our exchanges about disability identities and terms. In both disability communities and academic circles, disability terminology is debated, and we offer no resolve in this regard. Rather, we convey the transparent conversations we had with each other about disability identity terms to highlight the nuance needed to think through and understand an individual’s preferred terminology.

adam

...it's my understanding you identify as a disabled musician. Is that correct, or no?

Gift

Yeah, I identify as a disabled musician, but that depends on which scene I'm at. If I'm not within the disabled community, I just identify as a musician, just as an artist. I never highlight the disability, that part...it honestly depends on the context. I tend to use that [disability] interchangeably, depending on what aspect of musical artistry I am talking about. If I'm talking about adaptation of an instrument or software, then that's when I would take on the identity, saying, "disabled artist," because I'm talking about how I am retrofitting or how I am innovating, something to work for my needs. But if I'm talking about just my work as an artist, the creative process, then I just focus on my identity as an artist.

* * * * *

Jason

I use differently abled because I think the word disabled—again, I'm not trying to change your mind, but to me, disabled means unable.

adam

I apologize. I'll use that [differently abled]

Jason

No, no, no, no, you don't need to apologize. There's absolutely nothing to apologize for. It's just a different take on it. There's absolutely nothing wrong with saying disabled.

When I say differently abled... For example, you might click a button without using a mouse and I might press Enter on a keyboard to do the same function, right? So disabled would be I have no way of doing it, right? But it's me pressing Enter, where you click a mouse. It's just that we're more the same than different.

* * * * *

Notably, Jason’s preference for “differently abled” highlights the contentiousness of terminology inside and outside of disability communities. In contrast to Jason’s sentiment, consider the following statement by the Harriet Tubman Collective (2020):

The phrase “differently abled” suggests that we are the locus of our disability when we are, in fact, disabled by social and institutional barriers. Not only is this term offensive, but it also reifies the marginalization that Black Disabled/Deaf people face on a regular basis by and within our own communities and oppressive state institutions. (239)

The Harriet Tubman Collective’s rationale is rooted in a determinate account, whereas Jason’s rationale takes into account several factors including language, an openness to and acceptance of alternative interpretations and meanings, context, and his own lived experiences and epistemology. As previously mentioned, our thinking on contentious issues is both nuanced and complex. Still, the reality remains that “differently abled,” like “special needs,” is perceived by disability advocates as a euphemism (Williamson 2019, 11). In response, we have opted for either “disabled people” or “people with disabilities” interchangeably throughout this article in an effort to honor adherents of both identity-first and person-first terms. Inevitably, this choice will produce dissonance, but we echo the sentiment of Shakespeare (2013): “Quibbling over ‘disabled people’ versus ‘people with disabilities’ is a diversion from making common cause to promote the inclusion and rights of disabled people” (19).

Background: Learning in the Black Church, Family, and Recording Studio
With the matter of terminology consciously unsettled, we proceed with some background information of Jason and Gift, both of which are purposefully situated within music. We preface this section by calling to the reader’s attention that both Jason and Gift focus quite positively on music learning in their respective communities and families. Schooling is conspicuously absent in these accounts, which we address in the subsequent section.

adam

Can you give just some background info on who you are; tell me about yourself?

Gift

I am a singer, and I also play harmonica; not too many people know that! I primarily sing soul, R&B, and gospel genres of music. I've been doing music for 20 years and my gospel group, I've been directing it for 12 years. And then I do music producing for local artists in Montreal. I took leadership through Oliver Jones, he mentored me for about a year. And I took some vocal lessons in jazz and classical for a bit.

I started pretty young because I grew up in a Black Church, and Black Church music is very much part of the centerpiece within that community. You have to have some sort of musicality within you, whether it's singing or playing an instrument. And most of what I know was taught by trial-by-fire sort of thing, including figuring out and arranging harmonies, and knowing what harmony you should be singing without any chart. A lot of those skills in terms of like, amplifying my ear, it all came from growing up in the church and being part of the music team there.

adam

How do you learn music in the Black Church? Could you explain that?

Gift

I've never stopped to think about it in depth like that because it's such a norm for me. Within the Black Church, if you look at a lot of popular artists like Stevie Wonder, Ray Charles, Beyoncé, Alicia Keys, all of those great artists, even Whitney Houston, all of them, they grew out of Black Churches. And the thing is that if you do not learn music, there's not much for you to do within the church, there is nothing exciting for you to do. So, you will make the effort as much as you can to have some sort of music, even if you don't have a great voice. If you can hold a note, that's great, that's good enough. If you can keep the tempo with a tambourine at the very least, or an egg shaker, that's good enough. So, it's like you are forced

to tap into music somehow, in whatever capacity that you have, big or small. You will find your something that connects with you. That's what I meant with trial-by-fire.

You know that there are some people who just don't have singing in them, like they can't even hold a note at all, and that's okay. If that's you, then you will be a musician [instrumentalist] and they'll find an instrument that you can actually play. And then once you have that you feel the pressure to actually hone your craft. So, you will put in the time on your own because whenever we get to rehearsals there are no places [or time] for you to learn the music in rehearsals. Rehearsals are places for you to work on things that are complicated about the music piece. You have to really come in prepared to all music rehearsals at church. You have to always bring your A game. And also, not only just knowing your part. When I was growing up, for example, I sang both alto and tenor, and the reason why I sang both was because let's say we're missing an alto because they were sick or what have you, I should be able to step in and fill that role. Or, if a soloist, for whatever reason cannot be there, you need to know the soloist part really well in case you're called in at the last minute to take over. So, whether you were deemed vocals or instruments, you had to know at least the basics of the other parts, even if they're not yours, so that you can fill in those gaps.

adam

Do you remember how you practiced on your own so that when you came to those rehearsals you were ready?

Gift

The thing is I also come from a musical family. It's basically a competition where you're seeing your sibling, your brother, your sister, you know, they're doing their own vocal runs, they're putting in two, three hours a week and you're like, "Okay, I gotta do my thing, too and not look like a slacker!" I cannot speak to anyone who didn't come from a musical family what that experience was like, but I would imagine that they were still motivated and disciplined by the fact that everyone within the music team at

church was always bringing their A game. And if you didn't, you could potentially be kicked out from the choir or from the band.

* * * * *

adam

Can you give me a little bit of background information about yourself just to start us off?

Jason

Okay, sure. I'm Jason, and I'm from Trinidad. I've been in the industry for 20-plus years. I've run my own recording facility since 2000, first with my mom and my family, and then Sarah and I got married so she came on board. Both of us run the studio; we've done everything audio related from production of artists to a lot of what's happening in the advertising industry, commercials, jingles, and stuff. We did some film and post [production]. We did pretty much everything audio related. We continue to run a successful business in Trinidad and still do work there, although we are based in the UK because technology allows us to do so.

Trinidad is a small island, 1.6 million people. We had reached the peak of what we can do in Trinidad. We won some awards for film productions; we won several awards in the advertising industry, and we just felt we had a lot more to bring to the table and to learn as well. So, we decided, Sarah said, "Let's go to the UK and let's see what happens." So, I wrote to do my Master's in the British Irish Modern Music Institute.

The general infrastructure in Trinidad and in the Caribbean is not very good, in terms of being able to teach disabled or differently abled people. If somebody wants to join a church group, or choir where there is music or something like that they can, and everybody will rally around them. But how far can that really go? Somebody's making a decision they want a career in music or something like that, they don't have many avenues for them to run with it, to take it to the next level. I did it, fortunately, because I have a family that's second to none.

The Music Miseducation in Schooling

Social structures such as family and church were clearly positive influences on Jason's and Gift's respective musical upbringings. In contrast, both Jason and Gift discussed their experiences of formal school music with less fanfare. The best-case scenario described school music as lackluster, whereas in other instances, school music was absent or negative.

adam

What was your experience like with music in school?

Gift

I went to public school for high school. In elementary, it was a private school. With elementary, it is a little bit different because it was a school for students with disabilities. So being engaged in music was not a challenge at all because there were all these instruments, all these teachers who had the knowhow with regards to adaptation and accessibility when it comes to musical expression and playing. That part made things feel, "normal and seamless." So elementary, that's how it was structured. High school, it was not a problem, because I'd already taught myself how to play the harmonica. In high school, all students are given an instrument, like, "You're gonna play trumpet, you're gonna play saxophone," or what have you. And then for me, I was just like, "Can I just play my harmonica?" Because I already had a stand that was made for me. All I had to do was to learn how to read music, instead of learning how to play my instrument. How can I interpret what's on the sheet into sound?

adam

Do you remember the kind of stuff you did in elementary school for music? Like what kind of music you played, or what kind of instruments you played?

Gift

Yeah, for me, it was percussion. It was either electronic drums or the maracas wrapped on my hand with a strap. For me, rhythm was not an issue because that was just something that I knew.

adam

What kind of stuff did you play?

Gift

If I could rewind a little bit back, the way music was taught, it was like approaching it from a medical model because you were not just working with the music teacher, but you're also working with an occupational therapist, who is also evaluating your movements, like what are you capable of doing? Then they work with the teacher on like, "Oh these are the adapted instruments that would be best, or this is how we can make this work." So, it is not an interaction where it's just you and the teacher in a regular class. That's what I'd say would be the criticism that I would give, is that it was medicalized.

adam

Do you remember if it was that way for everyone in the school?

Gift

It was for everyone with significantly reduced mobility, that's when you would be working with a team of people. And then those who had more mobility than the rest of the class, they would just simply work with the teacher, they wouldn't be working with a team of experts. So, the separation was there, unfortunately.

adam

Thanks. And then the same for high school, what was that like? Concert band-style music class?

Gift

Yeah. I mean, even though I volunteered to just play the harmonica, I still didn't like it because it's not a charming instrument. You know that someone who plays drums, or percussion or whatever, it's considered a sexy instrument. Whereas with harmonica, it's like, *okay*.

adam

Do you have any recollections of that environment? Do you feel like it was an inclusive environment?

Gift

My teacher had it easy because in high school I was the only student with a physical disability. I know what I just said may sound like internalized ableism, but the reality is that any issue related to access, in my experiences, have often been received as "a burden." He just asked me, "What instrument can you play?" And then I just said, "Oh, harmonica, I already know how to play harmonica. But I just don't know how to read music." At that time, I had already been playing harmonica for three years and it was just from listening to songs and listening to how Stevie Wonder played and trying to mimic his style. That was it. But it's funny, it's like my harmonica playing only lasted for about five, six years and then when I started my group, I stopped playing harmonica. I was primarily focused on singing and composition.

* * * * *

adam

I don't know very much about Trinidad. Can you tell me about how music education works there?

Jason

Not very well for visually-impaired people, for differently abled people. Unfortunately, the opportunities are not very good. Most schools and colleges etc., are not equipped. So, for example, a number of years ago I wanted to enroll in a program at the University of Trinidad and Tobago,

and there was no way that I could enroll because nobody could have taught me. Ironically, a few years later, I was lecturing at that same university. Funny enough, I was called to lecture for several years to the graduating class on Pro Tools. And that same college couldn't teach me, so I had to go and teach myself Pro Tools. And then I was invited to come and give a few lectures. The opportunities aren't many, to the point where Sarah and I actually started running a couple workshops privately in our studio where I would teach blind people audio engineering and production.

adam

Is music a mandatory core subject in schooling in Trinidad?

Jason

It's basic, as basic as it gets in primary school. You're probably sitting down, and you've just played with a recorder or something like that. And it's not much more in secondary school. It might be a situation where you have to sing in a choir or something like that. It's not like serious music education. They probably teach you to read a little bit and culturally a lot of people would send girls to learn to play piano. You either dance or you play piano. This is more cultural than mandatory.

adam

Right. So, what I'm wondering is, did you participate in music? Was that accessible to you?

Jason

No. I think I took a guitar class for maybe a month or two or something. I think I did one piano lesson in my life. But you know, I'm self-taught basically.

adam

Right. So just to be clear, I'm wondering, did you choose not to be in that program or were you just excluded from it?

Jason

Good question. Maybe 50/50. First of all, I thought it was a little boring. I wasn't into playing a recorder. [Ever] Since I was small, I was fascinated by synthesizers and computers and drum machines. There was no avenue to offer that. So, I had to go do that on my own. I have been working in advertising since I was 15 years old in some of the big studios in Trinidad. There was nobody to teach me that. I had to go do that on my own. From that point of view, I chose to not be in it, not get involved in school curriculums. But even if I did, they wouldn't have been able to teach me anyway.

adam

Okay, why not?

Jason

Because they didn't have the teachers and stuff; did not have the training in dealing with a visually-impaired person, and of course whatever equipment they were using, it would have been even less accessible.

Adapting, Producing, Thriving

While schools were not sites where Jason or Gift thrived musically, they found other means of developing their musicianship, such as self- and peer-teaching. Furthermore, both Jason and Gift have thrived in roles as music producers working in community contexts. They engage in self-agency by employing technologies in innovative ways to make their own musical works accessible.

adam

When did you start self-teaching yourself instruments and how did you go about it? I know you play keyboard, but it sounds like you play other things, too. So maybe you could speak to that.

Jason

My main thing is the keyboard, my main instrument, but I do a lot of programming, a lot of electronic drum programming, and pretty much everything synthesizer. I can pick up a guitar on my own and survive, but I

wouldn't call myself a guitarist. I started messing around with music at about the age of nine. I picked up a keyboard, as you say you're self-taught, so you know what this is, you just realize you have the gift for it, you pick up a keyboard, you press keys and the keys sound like music. And then you start to become interested and start thinking about some theory and understand, "Okay, major chord, minor chord, how is a major chord?" You know? And as the years roll on by you just keep upping your game and you realize, "Wait now, okay, I am a musician."

adam

I was also curious when you started using a digital audio workstation?

Jason

I started in the '80s working with things like Studio Vision, Sound Tools, which was the precursor to Pro Tools, but what was crazy is when there was no screen reader technology—well they had it, but it was not widespread. I would just learn hundreds of keyboard shortcuts and there'll be no speech feedback, right? I just knew that "R" [key] takes you into record, you press the down arrow to go to the next track. And that's what I started in the early days. In those days I'd have to remember hundreds of keyboard shortcuts, I'd have to know the display inside out. Sometimes I'm able to freak people out if I tell them, okay, if you look to the bottom right of the screen, you're gonna see a red flashing icon. I want you to click this. So, everybody is, "Ah, if he's blind, how is he telling us this?" but it's just because I had to learn it that way. The screen reader technology is different now, tells me everything in Pro Tools.

I can't pretend it's all amazing and fantastic. Now I mean it could be something as simple as not finding a button on screen and Sarah has to come and click it for me. I have moments like that when you want to pull your hair out, or you want to cry.

You know the limitations we face in terms of accessibility, with not all equipment being accessible and finding workarounds, and all the chal-

lenges that come with being a differently abled music producer and engineer. A few years ago, I decided I'm not going to accept that things are not accessible. I started doing some basic programming—I happen to be a bit of a techie—so I can figure out why it's not accessible. Once I find out why, what can I do about it? I started, with Sarah, writing some macros, using Keyboard Maestro as a platform where we were able to do things like go into the software and create image-based macros to basically click on certain areas of the screen, develop voice prompts, find dialogue boxes, and checkboxes, etc., just basically find ways around writing some scripts in Keyboard Maestro for me to be able to navigate software that isn't accessible, to make it accessible. Word started getting around that I was using software that no other blind people were using and then it started to get out there, reaching manufacturers, and it was able to open up several conversations with manufacturers, retailers, and educators.

I can show you stuff that I have recorded, mixed, and mastered to show you that what I do competes with the best of them in the world. I'm not in any way trying to be arrogant or blow my own trumpet, but I have reached the stage where I could compete on an equal playing field with any producer, any engineer around the world, from recording to mastering, and I can start from the beginning, and I can have material that's ready for commercial distribution. It took me years to get here, took me about 20 years to get to this point.

* * * * *

adam

You said that you've been directing a gospel group, can you tell me about that group?

Gift

It's called the United Tribulation Choir. It's a group that my brother and I founded in 2007. Wow, almost 14 years! It's a non-denominational gospel group. It's people from all walks of life and they're not necessarily Christian. That was intentional in the way we structured the group. We have 18

members: 10 singers, and eight musicians. Most of the musicians, their background was either jazz or soul, or gospel because those are very related to the gospel genre. Most of our musicians came from that background. Same thing with singers, both trained and untrained, formally, I mean, because we have a lot of musicians who are actually very, very strong by ear, but they don't read charts. For vocals, same thing. It's 50/50, some read charts, some don't. The way we run rehearsals is we have charts and also, we have audio recordings for those who have a strong ear but don't read sheet music. I sing out the alto part, sing out the tenor, sopranos. Same thing with my brother, he would do the same. And then for musicians, the way we write charts for them is we use two programs. We use the software called Melodyne and Sibelius as well. With Melodyne we would record, let's say, a bassline with our voice. And then we'll fix the pitch correction, then we would convert that into a MIDI file. And then after that MIDI file, we're able to put it into Sibelius and then we're able to create a score, I mean it's not 100% accurate, but we're able to do corrections and have good sheet music.

adam

You also mentioned that you do music producing. Can you tell me a bit about that?

Gift

Yeah, so there's one project that I'm working on right now with an artist in Montreal. He's releasing his very first production. The way it worked with his project, he already had written the song, and I was able to envision what sort of instruments should be involved, and how they should be arranged, working on Digital Performer to arrange that. I coordinate in terms of hiring the musicians to do the recordings. My brother has a home studio, so we've been able to have one musician at a time to come and record their part. It's actually coming out pretty good! We've already finished one song, and I'm pretty impressed with it.

adam

How long have you been doing that [music production]?

Gift

Almost a year into starting our [gospel] group because when we started, it was exclusively members who are self-taught that play by ear. All the musicians just played by ear, and it was easy to do rehearsals, but as we were growing there were more and more members who preferred sheet music, and then that kind of forced us to start looking into ways to do music production.

The thing is for us is we would come up with arrangements and someone with a very good ear would understand exactly what we want and play it the exact way we want it, and of course with their own expression infused in that. But when it came to the musicians or singers who preferred to have sheet music to be able to execute exactly what we wanted, we were stuck there. And we didn't want to be turning away people because they prefer a certain way of speaking the music language.

Stevie Wonder Syndrome: Detailing Discrimination

Distinguishing the demarcation between ableism and racism is inefficacious because they overlap—this is the premise of DisCrit. Nevertheless, in the lived experiences of Jason and Gift, discrimination is not perceived as a layered composite of racism and ableism. Jason and Gift readily recalled instances of ableism they experienced as disabled and racialized musicians, based on societal stereotypes and expectations of popular musicians with disabilities. In contrast they both reported that racism was not something they personally experienced in music.

adam

What are the issues that you see with accessibility in music education?

Jason

First of all, people have this thing because Stevie Wonder is blind, and Stevie Wonder is Stevie Wonder. There's this perception that once you're blind, you got to do music, right? I've seen blind people who don't really want to do music, but society tells them when you're blind, you're gonna

play music, right? You're blind so you'll do music because Stevie Wonder does music, right? And then when you're blind and you don't become Stevie Wonder, it goes to the other extreme: it's a hobby. You stay at home, and you play piano and whatever. So, a lot of my challenge in trying to educate people is, I'm finding myself having to educate more than the disabled, the differently abled people themselves. I might have to talk to parents, "Does your child want to do this? Or do you want your child to do this?" It's a big difference, right? I'm finding myself having to educate parents and then once you start talking to them about music, you need to know from them, okay, is this a hobby? If it is, that's perfectly fine. But for some people like me, music is a career, there's nothing I'd rather do. But that's not the case for everybody.

[There are] a lot of rumors that I really don't think are true, like a simple one: Blind people hear better than sighted people, right? I personally think that's a lot of nonsense. Sarah has much better ears than I do. I will be ready with a mix ready to go, and Sarah will point out something at the last minute here with, "That drum fill is too loud," or "That vocal could be a little bit brighter," right? Sarah is sighted, I am not, right? So, it kind of debunks that myth. You know what that myth really means is that we use our hearing differently, so I might focus on things that you probably wouldn't need to focus on because you can see, but I might focus on something else.

Sarah always says that I can recognize her in a crowd by the way she walks, by the sound of how she walks, her foot fall. So, you would not need to listen for someone's foot fall because you'll see their face. The myth is that you hear better, but I don't think you hear better, I think you use the sense of hearing differently. That's been kind of my experience.

adam

A big theme right now in music education is talking about racism. I'm wondering if that's something that you've experienced in combination with ableism, like discrimination against disability. If that's something you've experienced, or could speak to?

Jason

On very few occasions, yes. I had this. I think the one that stands out in my mind is I've had a situation where I was in business for a long while; I was probably working for about seven or eight years in my own professional recording studio. I had someone come in, and they didn't want to work with me because I was blind. They figured I couldn't do the job. Now, funny enough, it was a crazy situation where when that word got out, none of the other studios wanted to work with this client. Because Trinidad is small, you have a little support network, everybody knows everybody. I had this one guy who was just very silly. He thought I couldn't do his job and his job was extremely simple. I mean, his job, I could do his job in my sleep, right? But he just decided to be an idiot about it, and I've had situations like that.

I remember once a friend of mine was in a session, and he asked me if I could assist them with something. The client was quite upset, he said, "With all due respect, I'd rather you do it," to the guy who had asked me to assist. He was just appalled at the idea that I was going to program something; he thought we'd be wasting his time. The reason the guy asked me is because at that particular task, I was probably a little bit more experienced than he was, so he was, "Jay, just give me a hand with this," you know, and the client was just not smart enough to leave us alone to do our thing. But few and far between, really.

adam

And the other thing related to that, I was wondering if racism has been an issue at all in your career.

Jason

Not really, I don't fall into Black or White. [note: Jason later clarified that he identifies as "mixed race," explaining that he's Black, White, and Chinese]

* * * * *

adam

A reason why I reached out to you is to talk about the experience of being a Black disabled person, musician. In music education, racism gets talked about a lot, and I think that's important. Disability isn't talked about really at all. And then we're not even as a field, I would say, at the point where we're talking about the intersections of these, you know? I would love to hear your thoughts on that.

Gift

I cannot speak to my experience [regarding racism], but I can speak to what my colleagues within the music fields have experienced.⁴

I'd say from my experience [regarding ableism], and from what I've seen from others, is that if you are a disabled artist, you become idolized as this super genius musician. This is largely due to the fact that a lot of disabled artists, like say, Ray Charles or Stevie Wonder, we know that they have incredible abilities of music that's more than average. And there's the assumption that because of those guys there's this incredible ability, that means any disabled artist must also have this incredible ability or virtuosity with music. I've experienced that firsthand. Whenever I'll do media news interviews, when I was talking about my work, I would be idolized to the same level as the greats who were also disabled artists. If I didn't have a disability and still had the same skill, I would have been considered just like an average artist, average musician, or an average singer, you know what I mean?

adam

Can you speak to other issues aside from that idolization piece? Are there other things that you can speak to with regard to access? Or perhaps ableism in a music realm?

Gift

Yeah, ableism. We all know how snobby the music scene can get, right? There have been times when I want to collaborate with other artists, but they don't want to work with me because they think I'm not a great artist

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because of my disability. And they wouldn't collaborate up until maybe if they see me collaborating with someone that they've worked with in the past. Then they would come around and be like, "Okay, let's collaborate," but at first, in initial conversation, that was not often the case.

And then within the media arts specifically, there's a lot of inspiration porn,⁵ where they would basically cover a piece about my brother and I, and the focus would be like, "Brothers with [diagnosis] defy the odds and create a music group," you know, instead of saying gospel artists creating non-denominational music in Montreal. But no, it would very much be focused on the diagnosis, and how based on that diagnosis you are not expected to be doing this. We do not expect much from you, but you're doing it even though you are not a music genius.

adam

I've certainly read some pieces like that before; you see a lot of it in the media.

Gift

It's difficult because I tried to change the narrative within the interviews, but they always find a way to twist the story so that it appeals to the masses. And after all of those experiences, now, what I try to do is—sometimes they'll ask me questions that I think are off the record, like, "Oh, so what's your disability?" You know, and then I'll talk about that, then they include that in the piece and say, like, "Gift with [diagnosis]," so now when I'm involved in those sorts of interviews, I just tell them that I like to keep that private. Would you ask someone about whatever health condition they have? So, I try to push away against that even within a casual conversation with any reporter.

Jazz Mindset: Advice for Music Educators

As a final prompt to Jason and Gift, adam solicited advice for the field of music education, premised on the precept that they are experts by virtue of their lived experiences as disabled and racialized musicians.

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adam

If you were to give advice to music educators about accessibility or about ableism, what would it be?

Gift

About accessibility, whether it's in music education or another field, I'd say approach accessibility from the mindset of a jazz artist. Why I'm saying this is you gotta enter a situation with an open mind and be willing to adapt, because in jazz there's a lot of improvisation. So, to music educators, when they look at accessibility, I'd say approach from a jazz standpoint and be willing and ready to improvise on the go, without any expectation on how the final music piece is going to sound like, or what the final outcome of whatever you're doing is going to be, because you will be impressed with the final product more than what you had perhaps set it out to be initially.

adam

What about ableism or anti-ableism?

Gift

With ableism, like even with myself as a disability rights activist, I can be ableist. I can have ableist tendencies and acknowledge them. I'm in the learning process; it doesn't matter how much I know. But I think to avoid ableism, what I want to recommend is, "Just ask and be ready and open to learn." Just ask how a person should be addressed. It's the best way possible. I would say yes, learn the basics of what ableism is as a starting point and the minutiae of it. Be eager to learn. It still comes back to my statement earlier of taking a jazz approach. Same applies to ableism. There will be errors, but be eager to learn and be open to being corrected.

* * * * *

adam

Since I'm trying to reach music educators as an audience, if you're giving some advice, or some thoughts, what would you try to express to them? Or what would you want them to know?

Jason

It's a situation where if everybody were to make small modifications—nobody's asking for a miracle for the world to become accessible tomorrow. We have to pull together to make that change, and it is possible and it's happening. People just have to approach it as a mission to do it together, as opposed to anybody demanding anything. Don't make demands because nothing puts people off more than, "You have to do this." Let's build together, let's do it together, right? You're not gonna do it for me, I'm not gonna do it for you, we're gonna do this together. Because that's what will break down barriers. And that's what will spark conversation, which will lead to action, right? Create a situation as much as you can, where it's a win-win situation for all. That's what I would say as my advice, it's a journey that we need to enjoy together. I'll say one more time, as I said before, please don't be oversensitive.

I'm not forcing anyone to be me or to be like me, but a lot of people ask me what works for me, and these are the things that work for me. You know why? Why are we able to have that conversation? So, at the end of this, I don't want you to be thinking next week that, "Oh, I had a conversation last week with this guy Jay, he's blind. And imagine he plays music because he's blind, and this is so fascinating." This is not what I want you to take away, I want you to take away is, "Oh Jay and I had a chat last week, we probably talked about doing some music together. We talked about the fact that we're both self-taught," the things like that, that's the takeaway. When you think about me, and remember me, you're not to remember a fascinating person who's blind and who plays music. This is "Oh, my friend, Jay. This is what breaks down those barriers. And this is what equalizes or normalizes the conversation." This is how I try to present myself.

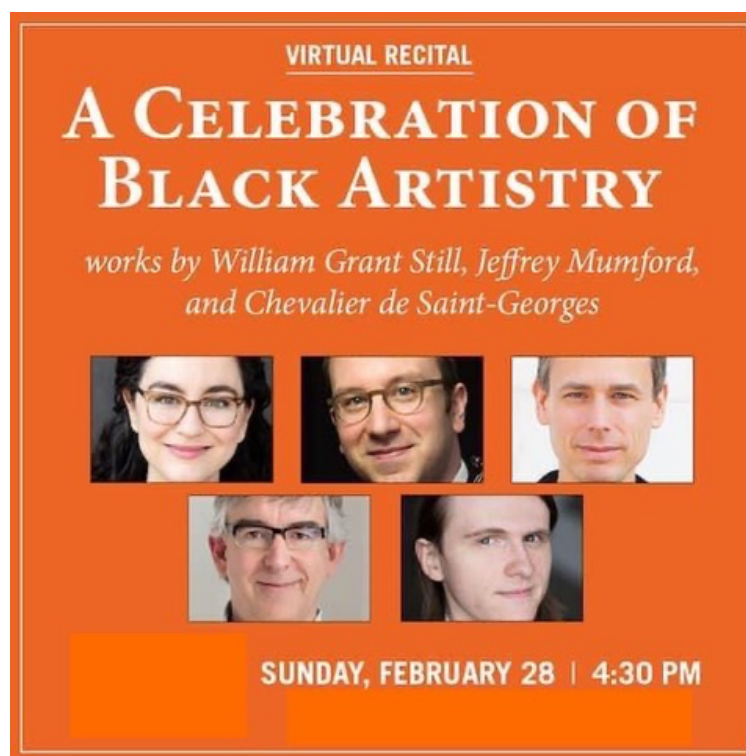
Conclusions and Questions

What do disabled and racialized musicians experience and therefore know that is different from their unmarked peers? Jason and Gift are but two people, yet given the previously reported grim statistics related to the intersections of disability and race, they represent millions of people on the planet who are conspicuously absent in academic discourses on music education. To the reader we ask, do you remember your disabled and racialized music teachers? Neither do we, and this is not an issue of memory but of systemic malfeasance. As a result, the field of music education has a deficit of disability epistemology. Consider, based on the accounts of Jason and Gift, what the lived experiences of disabled and racialized musicians have to offer music pedagogy. First, a radical reframing of what constitutes disability in music is evident in how Gift experienced learning in his family and in the Black Church where music-making was expected of him in the same way that it was expected of his siblings and peers. Similarly, Jason credits his family and the tight-knit music production community in Trinidad as harbors of support for his development as a musician. These aforementioned experiences were unabashedly positive to the point where it could be argued that disability is a desirable practice in music (Porco 2014).

In contrast, the places and spaces of formal schooling leave much to be desired for Jason and Gift. Gift recalled that his private elementary school, which specialized in disability accommodations, facilitated a somewhat segregated music class that doubled as a site of rehabilitative assessment. High school offered a more genuine integrative experience for Gift, yet he found himself playing an instrument in which he was not genuinely invested. Granted, the bar is low, but more troubling is Jason's acceptance of exclusion from publicly funded music education. These anecdotes amplify the type of educational debt (Thorius and Tan 2016), or at least impoverishment, that disabled and racialized musicians encounter in the teaching and learning of music in schools. Disabled and racialized musicians are mostly absent from the curricula, classrooms, and consciousness of music education. Yet, they flourish elsewhere, such as directing a choir (Gift) or directing a recording session (Jason). They teach themselves, forge their own career paths, and adapt music technologies to increase accessibility to music-making both for themselves, and by extension, for others. All of this is done while slogging through the abject and ableist societal expectations of extremes from greenhorn to guru, premised on

the pathologizing of disability as the source of either scarce or savant musicality. Yet how do Jason and Gift respond? With gracious suggestions and requests to build a better society together. Jason and Gift do not want to be inspiration porn. If their epistemologies are construed as epiphanies for music education, it speaks to the dire need of infusing DisCrit in the discipline.

Jason and Gift have thrived in the margins of mainstream music education, and it is conceivable that other disabled and racialized musicians are thriving in the periphery, too. But what about those who do not have the same family and community support to thrive in music? Could music education be a barricade to block the school-to-prison pipeline? Can music education lead in paying down the educational debt that shackles disabled and racialized students? The field of music education's practices, predicated on norms of nondisabled whiteness, must be diminished, dismantled, and destroyed in a swift succession that results in a reset of what currently passes as permissible. Armchair anti-racism couched in convenience and aimed at the low-hanging fruit (e.g., "A Celebration of Black Artistry"—see Fig. 2) tends to fizzle fast and be forgotten, failing the very people it portends to help while elevating White artists.



Music education needs to reach beyond repertoire and delve into the discomfort that DisCrit offers. Disabled and racialized bodyminds reveal the need to radically recalibrate not just histories and theories of music, but also their underpinnings, right down to the nuanced details of what is conceptualized as music, the things we use to make music, and how we use them. How might DisCrit flip the script of music teaching and learning? Music education cannot afford to divest from the epistemological richness of disabled and racialized musicians. As the analogy of “a seat at the table” makes its rounds in the realm of anti-racism rhetoric, we politely request the removal of some seats to make space for wheelchair users and the communities they symbolize and represent.

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Notes

¹ The term “bodymind” was coined by Margaret Price in her 2015 article, “The Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain.” Schalk (2018, 5) provides the following explanation of the term and its intended meaning(s):

Bodymind is a materialist feminist disability studies concept from Margaret Price that refers to the enmeshment of the mind and body, which are typically understood as interacting and connected, yet distinct entities due to the Cartesian dualism of Western philosophy. ... The term bodymind insists on the

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inextricability of mind and body and highlights how processes within our being impact one another in such a way that the notion of a physical versus mental process is difficult, if not impossible to clearly discern in most cases (269). Price argues that bodymind cannot be simply a rhetorical stand-in for the phrase “mind and body”; rather, it must do theoretical work as a disability studies term.

² BIPOC is an abbreviation for Black, Indigenous, and people of color.

³ Arguably, to date Rathgeber (2019) has conducted the most exhaustive review of music education literature related to disability studies. The majority of the literature reviewed is conducted by nondisabled White researchers on (or with) White participants with disabilities.

⁴ We removed this section to delimit the data to Gift’s experiences as opposed to relaying his peers’ experiences.

⁵ According to Bell and Rathgeber (2020):

Inspiration porn is a representation of a person who has some observable “stigma sign” engaged in an everyday activity (Goffman, 1963). Yet the activity is cast by a nondisabled viewer/ listener as something to marvel at, as something that tugs at the heartstrings, as some thing wholly unexpected due to a problematic assumption of a disabled person’s abilities and humanity. The everyday activity is transformed from the mundane to the inspirational as a nondisabled viewer/listener assumes a narrative of overcoming on the part of the viewed/heard disabled subject. (p. 581)