
Black, autistic space invaders in the supervisory encounter

Author(s): Jada Brown

Email: jbrown42@student.bbk.ac.uk

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Supervisory relationships between students and academics in higher education are inherently structured by imbalances of authority and expertise, but in everyday practice, these asymmetries are normalised, minimised, or obscured. This article uses Nirmal Puwar's (2013) concept of "space invaders" to critically examine the workings of power in supervisory relationships where the supervisee is both Black and autistic. Racialised, neurodivergent and other non-normative student subjectivities entering elite academic spaces can be treated as infiltrators or disruptors of the status quo when both their embodiment and epistemes are positioned as "out of the ordinary" or "risky". Using examples from my doctoral research with Black, autistic students, this analysis discusses how power can be lived and felt through processes of disorientation (what happens when a non-normative body enters a space) and amplification (when non-normative bodies are over-scrutinised and deliberately rendered hypervisible). I focus on the micro-practices within the supervisory encounter that can reproduce ableism, Whiteness and control, particularly when positions of privilege remain (intentionally and unintentionally) unacknowledged. I conclude by imagining a power-conscious (rather than power-absent) supervisory space that foregrounds relationality, intersectional embodiment, and the institutional responsibility to co-create supervisory norms that genuinely account for neurodivergence and race.

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Introduction

Postgraduate supervision is a complicated and intricate process that has meaning beyond mere academic guidance and support. Although many students have supportive and encouraging supervisors, the quality of supervisory relationships remains a top concern, especially considering poor supervisory relationships are the main reason for doctoral student attrition.¹ Many students enter supervision assuming that it will be a meritocracy and that they will be judged based on their skill and hard work. However, this assumption risks overlooking how power operates within supervisory relationships, because even well-intentioned ones can produce inequality, especially when supervisors are the only ones positioned as experts. Power is fundamentally relational and often exists as a dynamic between people, systems, and structures. This article focuses on the 'producing' nature of power in supervision and how it not only shapes student outcomes but also constructs particular norms and standards. Despite higher education widening participation policies to increase access for marginalised students² and most universities having a 'diversity and inclusion agenda',³ these norms typically reflect a Eurocentric, white, male, middle-class, and neurotypical standard. When only some bodies are imagined as the natural occupants of that space, those that deviate from this norm are positioned as "dissonant bodies", provoking discomfort and exclusionary practices.⁴ They are invaders of that space, understood as both the physical higher education environment and the metaphorical dimensions that represent the social relations and cultural meanings operating within it. The dichotomous position of being an insider-outsider may therefore manifest as being corporeally present in an academic space but ideologically misfitting.

¹ Christelle Devos and others, 'Doctoral Students' Experiences Leading to Completion or Attrition: A Matter of Sense, Progress and Distress', *European Journal of Psychology of Education*, 32.1 (2017), pp. 61–77, doi:[10.1007/s10212-016-0290-0](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10212-016-0290-0).

² Manuel Madriaga, 'Reframing Race and Widening Access into Higher Education', *Higher Education*, 86.6 (2023), pp. 1455–70, doi:[10.1007/s10734-022-00981-y](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-022-00981-y).

³ Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Duke University Press, 2012).

⁴ Nirmal Puwar, *Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies out of Place* (Berg, 2004).

The discussion that follows uses Nirmal Puwar's⁵ concepts of disorientation and amplification to highlight the complexities that Black, autistic students face in university supervision when their bodyminds are treated as infiltrators or disruptors of the status quo. Black, autistic students entering UK universities are automatically minoritised because their subjectivities are non-normative and hypervisible due to the normalising and invisible operation of Whiteness and ableism.⁶ An academic supervisory relationship has the power to either reassert their marginalised position, or uplift them, building upon and validating their embodiment, ways of thinking, and ways of sensing the world.

Methodology and Research Context

This analysis is informed by my doctoral research, a qualitative exploration of the higher education experiences of Black, autistic students in the UK. To date, there has been very little research in the UK that has specifically explored the impact of being autistic while Black in the UK higher education system. This is what Malone and colleagues define as the scholarly neglect of Black, autistic communities, "the assumption that findings from autism research applies to *all* groups and/or the failure of research teams to adequately recruit racially and ethnically representative samples."⁷ This research makes space for Black, autistic voices by using an intersectional, interdisciplinary lens, informed by key ideas from Critical Autism studies, Critical Disability Studies, Dis/ability Critical Race Theory, and Critical Race Theory. It centres the key claim from Dis/ability Critical Race Theory that race and ability are co-constructed categories and cannot be understood separately due to the way multidimensional identities and intersecting structural forces impact multiply marginalised people's lived experiences.⁸

In this research, which was collaboratively designed with an autistic lived experience advisory group, I spoke to 10 students in semi-structured interviews, or as I prefer to call them, "conversations", as well as receiving contributions from 13 students on an online discussion board which asked about their experiences at university, including questions surrounding identity, belonging, and social and academic university life. This

⁵ Puwar, *Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies out of Place*.

⁶ Chantelle Jessica Lewis and Jason Arday, 'We'll See Things They'll Never See: Sociological Reflections on Race, Neurodiversity and Higher Education', *Sociological Review*, published online 2023, doi:[10.1177/00380261231184357](https://doi.org/10.1177/00380261231184357).

⁷ Kayla M. Malone and others, 'The Scholarly Neglect of Black Autistic Adults in Autism Research', *Autism in Adulthood*, 4.4 (2022), pp. 271–80, doi:[10.1089/aut.2021.0086](https://doi.org/10.1089/aut.2021.0086).

⁸ Subini Ancy Annamma, David Connor, and Beth Ferri, 'Dis/Ability Critical Race Studies (DisCrit): Theorizing at the Intersections of Race and Dis/Ability', *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 16.1 (2013), pp. 1–31, doi:[10.1080/13613324.2012.730511](https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2012.730511).

article is based on discussions I had with several postgraduate students during the interview part of this research, where we discussed their relationships with supervisors and the impact this had on their overall university experience. Their responses revealed the nature of higher education support systems and their benefits and pitfalls when it comes to supporting Black, autistic students. The supervisory encounter was mentioned as a key site of struggle and negotiation, drawing attention to the implications of embodied and epistemic difference. When direct quotes are presented from students below, their pseudonyms will be used for anonymity.

Theoretical Framework: Nirmal Puwar's *Space Invaders*

In her book, Nirmal Puwar notes how there has been an important shift in the increased presence of women and racially minoritised people in spaces that have historically been reserved for and dominated by white, middle-class, heterosexual men.⁹ Yet, minoritised people continue to experience an overwhelming feeling of not belonging because social structures like Whiteness and neuronormativity are metaphorically built into the bricks of these spaces.¹⁰ When Puwar speaks about how “bodies do not just move through spaces but constitute and are constituted by them”, she is referring to the mutual dynamic relationship between our identities, positionalities, and the environments we inhabit. Spaces are actively shaped by the bodies that have historically moved through and inhabited them comfortably; they set expectations about which bodyminds effortlessly belong there.¹¹

The concept of ‘space invaders’ applied to higher education pays attention to the way universities have historically been reserved for a specific type of student. There’s an amnesia of imperialism and colonial histories in discussions of higher education systems, practices, and policies. Universities are not neutral environments but are instead saturated with a colonial memory that in many cases is difficult to escape from. This is why many racially minoritised students can “be of and in a space, while at the same time not quite belonging to it.”¹² Puwar wrote *Space Invaders* with reference to race and gender, but this can be expanded to neurodivergence and disability in higher education; disability studies show us that the somatic norm is also implicitly non-disabled and neurotypical.

⁹ Puwar, *Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies out of Place*.

¹⁰ Rhianna Garrett, ‘The Architecture of Whiteness’, in *Area*, no. 4, preprint, John Wiley and Sons Inc, 1 December 2025, LVII, doi:[10.1111/area.70039](https://doi.org/10.1111/area.70039).

¹¹ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Duke University Press, 2006).

¹² Puwar, *Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies out of Place*.

Autistic people can therefore become space invaders when higher education spaces presume specific communication and processing styles, sensory experiences, and normative behaviours as basic entry conditions. The concept of space invaders can be further complicated when we think about intersectionally marginalised people, like the Black, autistic students in my research. It can provide a framework for understanding the implications of violating multiple but connected norms at once, producing a nuanced experience of feeling ‘out of place’.

In the supervisory encounter, the students in my research came to be positioned as space invaders through two specific relational processes: disorientation and amplification.¹³ Disorientation occurs when there is an institutional somatic and psychic norm that extends to the supervisory space, producing an enforced and felt sense of unease for those who have historically been kept ‘outside’. This heightens feelings of being ‘different’ and generally feeling unsure about their own embodiment. Disorientation also happens for those in the privileged position of being considered the ‘natural’ occupants of the space (e.g., the white neurotypical supervisor); sharing the space with ‘outsiders’ can cause ontological anxiety and cause defensive reactions when power dynamics in a space become disrupted. Disorientation also gives rise to amplification. Amplification in supervision describes the way dissonant bodies are magnified, scrutinised, and over-interpreted when compared to the normative occupants of the space. Their bodyminds become a threat to the power of Whiteness and neuronormativity.

Disorientation in the Supervisory Encounter

The presence of marginalised students and their difference in university supervision “disorients” the institution’s taken-for-granted norms and aesthetics. Dis/ability critical race theory (DisCrit) speaks about how racism and ableism are normalising processes and work together to reproduce and uphold Whiteness and ability as the cultural standard.¹⁴ This means that Black, autistic students entering academic supervision can feel like an intrusion, which can be further intensified by the presence of a white, neurotypical supervisor. Racial and neuro-differences can signal to the bodymind that you do not belong; the visibility of the student’s subjectivity alone can be unsettling. Disorientation in the supervisory relationship can also operate through the dominant behavioural norms of the space. Black, autistic students must navigate physical and

¹³ Puwar, *Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies out of Place*.

¹⁴ Annamma, Connor, and Ferri, ‘Dis/Ability Critical Race Studies (DisCrit): Theorizing at the Intersections of Race and Dis/Ability’.

metaphorical spaces designed around white and neurotypical communicative, sensory, and behavioural norms. Many autistic people may struggle with verbal spontaneity, knowing when to speak, impromptu task switching, inflexible scheduling, deadlines, and on-the-spot processing and response to information, which are typical characteristics of supervisory meetings. A current PhD student, Elise, spoke about how her bluntness and lack of interest in small talk, which she attributes to both being autistic and her Bajan heritage, can make other people perceive her as aggressive or rude.

I'm direct because culturally I come from a very direct cultural background, we don't beat around the bush, we beat in the bush...We're just straight to the point, then you add a bit of autism to the mix, right, and people think you're like...coming at them in an aggressive kind of way. (Elise)

When there is a communicative norm, differing from this norm makes Black, autistic students hyper-visible and can cause them to operate in a chronic state of hyper-vigilance, not knowing or understanding the 'correct' way in which they are meant to act. This can often lead to the masking of autistic behaviours (such as self-stimulatory behaviours (stimming) and forcing eye contact) and codeswitching in supervision just to be read as appropriate. Masking while autistic and Black is necessary for survival¹⁵ and this extends to the supervisory space.

Disorientation also happened in seemingly mundane practices like receiving feedback. Aminata, who is a current Master's student in Critical Autism Studies, explained how she finds vague or softened feedback confusing and anxiety-inducing. Despite consistently achieving above 70% on all assignments, she was not given adequate or specific feedback to improve her work.

For a student like myself who consistently gets firsts, [I want to know] how to increase the percentage scores even more...and just the confidence boost of, you know, what's going well with my theorising or writing or thinking or engagement in class discussion. Yeah, I think the feedback element would be very helpful especially for autistic people with rejection sensitivity dysphoria. I feel like I need constant affirmation and confidence building and feedback would be the primary way of tackling that. (Aminata)

As a student who struggles with perfectionism and prefers explicit communication about areas of work that worked well and those that needed development, not receiving useful feedback was difficult to navigate. Whilst this is an experience that may disadvantage all

¹⁵ Tré Ventour-Griffiths, 'LONG-READ – Autistic While Black in the UK: Masking, Codeswitching, and Other (Non)Fictions', <https://neuroclastic.com/long-read-autistic-while-black-in-the-uk-masking-codeswitching-and-other-nonfictions/>, 28 April 2022.

students, a reading from Puwar's perspective could imply that a high-achieving Black, autistic student is experienced as a disruption to the ingrained expectations about who typically succeeds. It is disorientation by omission; the absence of useful feedback causes the lowering of standards and left Aminata second-guessing her ability and place at the university. It is as if Black, autistic excellence is tokenised; while her achievement may look good to the supervisor and university, the white, neurotypical somatic norm is maintained by limiting the further development of her excellence. When students like Aminata experience rejection sensitivity dysphoria, the intense emotional response to rejection, failure, criticism, which can increase the feeling of being "out of place", effective feedback can make students feel like their knowledge and thinking are credible and legitimate.

Finally, disorientation occurred through practices that on the surface are meant to facilitate inclusion of marginalised identities. In supervision, students can ask for reasonable adjustments, letting supervisors know what they need to make supervision accessible and safe for them. However, for the students in my research, reasonable adjustments often caused bodily and affective dislocation, signalling unbelonging. The university typically gets to decide and control what is reasonable, therefore they are the gatekeepers of support. Several students in my research mentioned having to give evidence for their need for adjustments and adaptations to standard university practice, essentially trying to 'prove' that they differ from the idealised institutional norm. This is harder for students who lack a formal diagnosis, something which disproportionately impacts Black people.¹⁶ Not only is there a disclosure burden on students, who are often forced to shared personal information with people and institutions who have power over them, it also reinforces the message that autism is something to be compensated for. Their difference is spotlighted and is positioned as something to be managed through ad hoc adjustments and changes. Unsettled by the students' differences, reasonable adjustments become a way of managing discomfort by bringing students closer to the institutional norm rather than disrupting it.¹⁷

[She asked] does anyone have anything I should know about? I was like, "I've got autism". And then as the weeks went on, she never really had meetings with me to ask how I cope and stuff. She was very dismissive, or she would shut me down. (Jasmine)

¹⁶ Laura Dattaro, 'Diagnosis Timeline Drags for Black Autistic Children', <https://www.spectrumnews.org/news/diagnosis-timeline-drags-for-black-autistic-children/>, 24 August 2020.

¹⁷ Damian Milton, Nicola Martin, and Pauline Melham, 'Beyond Reasonable Adjustment: Autistic-Friendly Spaces and Universal Design', *Autism and Intellectual Disability in Adults*, 1 (2017), pp. 81–85.

Denying a student reasonable adjustments can also be understood as disorientation due to the way it makes visible the exclusion built into the institution's unspoken norms. Jasmine, who was completing a physiotherapy Master's degree, had a terrible experience of accessing reasonable adjustments when she disclosed her diagnosis and needs to her supervisor who refused to give her the adjustments she required. This supervisor claimed to have given Jasmine reasonable adjustments (time to write extra notes) at her end of placement review, but in practice she rushed her to finish her work and drew attention to her behaviour in front of other students. Jasmine attributed this to blatant racism, noting that she was the only Black student in her cohort. When reasonable adjustment requests are ignored completely, this constitutes disability discrimination and a breach of a supervisor's and university's legal duty under the Equality Act 2010 to provide support for disabled students. From Puwar's perspective, such supervisory refusal is not simply negligence but an anxious response to a Black student occupying a historically white space.

Amplification: The Weaponisation of Difference

While disorientation is when a novel body enters higher education, a normed space, amplification is when disorientation gets weaponised, heightening the scrutiny of actions to reproduce and importantly maintain the 'desired' somatic norm. Amplification can occur epistemically, extending beyond bodily presence to how knowledge and ideas are dismissed under the somatic norm. This is even the case in postgraduate research where the student is the expert of their own topic.

My topic is on resilience. And I asked whether I should ask participants what their definition of resilience is, because I was aware from my personal experience that dominant narratives in the West or dominant constructs can completely differ to indigenous concepts. And my supervisor initially said, no, you don't need to ask them what their perception on resilience is or their definitions... I feel that university supervisors are usually people with dominant identities who have that central perspective. (Aminata)

Aminata noted how her supervisors could not understand why she would want to ask her participants their personal definition of the central theme in her research, presuming their Eurocentric definition to be universal. Elise, also described a time when her supervisors subjected her to an all-white doctoral progression panel who questioned her research topic (focusing on Black women) and theoretical framework (Black feminist theory), resulting in an aggressive and traumatic experience.

But I think, you know, she is a white woman. There have been things she hasn't understood. When I did my first progression panel. I said, look... could you choose two people for my panel who you think would be a good fit, who would understand what it is I'm trying to do? She chose a white man and a white woman. (Elise)

Whiteness as power led to a disproportionately amplified scrutiny of her work. When your worldsense is interrogated, it can feel like an attack on your entire being, and for both these students, this was intensely felt within their whole bodymind. Elise's white, neurotypical supervisor, who chose the panellists, made "I never knew" claims when defending her choice. Whiteness, as an invisible power, can be normalising and cause supervisors to miss instances of racism, discrimination, or microaggressions. Supervisory relationships can therefore directly and indirectly play a role in shaping whether the students' knowledge gets explored, validated, and valued. Aminata also noted the constant struggle of whether "to translate yourself into the dominant person's terms in order to be understood". Luckily, both these students defended their research perspectives and decisions, but it was a battle that should not have been fought.

Questioning feedback and defending your epistemologies and perspectives on your research and the world can be risky for Black, autistic students when their supervisor has the power to control their progression, their career, and their educational outcomes. Supervisors have authority through their title, position, and their defined responsibilities in the university's bureaucratic culture. Their superior position in the university's normalised hierarchy means their opinions and feedback can be treated as objective and definitive; when their feedback is rejected and questioned, it can provoke infantilisation of the 'junior' student, perceiving their challenge or pushback to be evidence of naivety or needing more guidance. If a student were to accept their supervisor's perspective at the expense of their own, it can impact their ability to explore their studies and research beyond their supervisor's vantage point and can create dependence, especially in the absence of adequate and effective institutional support. In universities that lack inclusive spaces and communities for Black autistic students to get social and academic support, which many of my research contributors pointed out, an over-reliance on supervisors can exacerbate both academic and emotional vulnerabilities.

Maya, a recent PhD graduate in Environmental Science, mentioned that she considered the established hierarchies in higher education to be pointless or ambiguous. Research indicates that some autistic people have a reduced interest in social hierarchies

and are less likely to observe or prioritise them if they are viewed as illogical.¹⁸ Seniority in the supervisory relationship may not be readily recognised when supervision is perceived as a partnership rather than a hierarchical chain of command.

I don't see these hierarchies. I'm just like, if you're cool, I'd love to collaborate with you. I don't really observe these hierarchies and I think they found that quite threatening. (Maya)

Role power in supervision relies on the students' acceptance of this hierarchy, so when students like Maya reject their supervisor's superiority, they can be perceived as uncooperative, unmanageable, or threatening. When race is added into the mix, it is more likely that the behaviour of autistic students will be interpreted in terms of stereotypical 'Black conduct', positioning them as disruptive or deviant.¹⁹ Maya described that her lack of prioritisation of hierarchy was labelled as aggressive and difficult, reinforcing the trope of the 'angry Black woman'. A Black, autistic woman entering white, neurotypical spaces, and not conforming to the normative rules of that space, means her actions and behaviour are excessively scrutinised to perpetuate harmful racial stereotypes. Having a multiply marginalised identity also left several students questioning whether it was their race, autism, or gender that was amplifying their position as an outsider in the supervisory encounter; an intersectional dissonant body that is under scrutiny can therefore blur the lines of discrimination.

Aminata made the important observation that Black, autistic students are "epistemically marginalised as well as marginalised in [their] embodiment". However, even when there is embodied similarity, which typically can increase feelings of safety, it does not always guarantee power neutralisation, mutual understanding, or effective support, particularly if the supervisor has internalised the somatic norm. Amplification can still occur if the student's supervisor shares a part of their identity because "dissonance" is structural. Elise made an important claim, that particularly for doctoral students, they "cross the threshold from student to colleague", entering a potentially competitive space. Their excellence is no longer viewed as something to be encouraged because it threatens the supervisor's precarious position in the university. This is especially true for Black, autistic people, where bringing unique perspectives and ways of thinking about the world can be constructed as dangerous and disruptive to the white subject,

¹⁸ Catherine L. Caldwell-Harris and Anna M. Schwartz, 'Why Autistic Sociality Is Different: Reduced Interest in Competing for Social Status', *Ought: The Journal of Autistic Culture*, 5.1 (2023), doi:[10.9707/2833-1508.1145](https://doi.org/10.9707/2833-1508.1145).

¹⁹ O. Spense, "'Zero Tolerance' of Black Autistic Boys: Are Schools Failing to Recognise the Needs of African Caribbean Boys with a Diagnosis of Autism?", *The Neurodiversity Reader*, 2020, pp. 189–209.

especially when those perspectives are characterised as ‘useful’ or ‘valuable’ within the neoliberal university. This resonates with Zora Neale Hurston’s statement, “all skinfolk ain’t kinfolk”²⁰; higher education institutions can co-opt minoritised “insiders” to police and enforce norms against other minoritised students, therefore rupturing solidarity in the supervisory encounter.

The focus on structural and systemic power and influence means interpersonal factors are always neglected as an important reason why many students feel like intruders in the supervisory space. Supervisors must have ability to actually *supervise* through skills such as listening and patience, and attributes such as empathy, compassion, and being non-judgemental. Interpersonal power cannot be separated from wider social and institutional relations and ideologies, nor the characteristics of the person involved, but effective supervisory relations can happen when both parties are privy to the differences and power dynamics that are operating within the space. Supervision is both how well the university has equipped the supervisor to supervise well, considering embodied differences, but also how willing the supervisor is to do this. Inflexibility and a refusal to understand the multidimensionality of a student through cultural and neurodiversity education is as much an interpersonal problem as it is institutional.

Toward Power-Conscious Supervision

I do not assume that knowledge is the key to seeing through power and liberating ourselves from it. Psychoanalytic approaches suggest that the supervisory encounter involves unconscious workings of power on both an individual and structural level; ideologies, norms and beliefs can unconsciously shape how people view their place in the world.²¹ This is how inequalities become naturalised and how hegemony is created. Power-conscious supervision, however, can make this unspoken hegemony visible and contestable, interrogating the dynamics embedded in supervisory relationships and opening space for pluralistic ways of thinking, behaving, and working. The supervisory space should be co-constructed and there should be co-responsibility. Whilst the supervisor should continue to centre generic supervisory values²² from the get-go, there

²⁰ David W. Marshall, ‘All Skinfolk Ain’t Kinfolk’, <https://Peacemakeronline.Com/Stories/All-Skinfolk-Aint-Kinfolk,86987>, 12 December 2025.

²¹ Helen Lucey and Chrissie Rogers, ‘Power and the Unconscious in Doctoral Student-Supervisor Relationships’, in *Power, Knowledge and the Academy*, ed. by V. Gillies and H Lucey (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 16–36.

²² Marina Palomo, Helen Beinart, and Myra J. Cooper, ‘Development and Validation of the Supervisory Relationship Questionnaire (SRQ) in UK Trainee Clinical Psychologists’, *British Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 49.2 (2010), pp. 131–49, doi:[10.1348/014466509X441033](https://doi.org/10.1348/014466509X441033).

needs to be a recognition that there is no correct way to 'do' supervision. The student and supervisor need to develop an understanding of what each person brings, acknowledging differences but not assigning higher value to supervisor's perspectives. This includes the supervisor actively acknowledging or inviting students to discuss barriers that may impact their participation. Pratt describes contact zones as "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination."²³ Seeing higher education supervision as a 'contact zone' can encourage supervisors and students to engage in productive dialogue with an inclusion and acknowledgement of difference, including that of lived experience, identity, and cultural background.

Many non-Western traditions emphasise the relational aspect of learning and knowledge production.²⁴ From this perspective, the relationship between the student and supervisor is the main tool for learning and support, recognising that both parties co-create the space by bringing their own unique embodied knowledge and wisdom. In a relational model, the supervisor does not simply provide top-down direction and objective scrutiny of the student's work, but rather provide feedback that is mutual, empathetic, and respectful.

In African diasporic traditions, call-and response (in song, storytelling and oral practices) is a patterned exchange and communication technique where the caller initiates a song, phrase, story and the audience responds with an immediate spoken reply.²⁵ Call-and-response can be a relational model for supervision due to the way it centres attention, understanding, and shared values. Both the supervisors and students can be the caller. Supervisors call through questions, prompts, reflections, inviting the students to respond with their own thoughts and perspectives, but students can also call, initiating new ideas, narratives or requesting information or clarification that requires the supervisors' response. Diasporic call-and-response supervision not only normalises interactive participation, but functions to maintain cultural identity in institutional spaces. It can be neuroaffirming when the call-and-response is made predictable and optional, and when the supervisor honours and respects the student's ontologies and epistemologies, including spiritual insights, learning styles, or individual attributes that

²³ M. L. Pratt, *Imperial Writing and Transculturalism* (Routledge, 1992).

²⁴ Louis Botha, Dominic Griffiths, and Maria Prozesky, 'Epistemological Decolonization through a Relational Knowledge-Making Model', *Africa Today*, 67.4 (2021), pp. 51–72, doi:[10.2979/AFRICATODAY.67.4.04](https://doi.org/10.2979/AFRICATODAY.67.4.04).

²⁵ Maggie Sale, 'Call and Response as Critical Method: African-American Oral Traditions and Beloved', *African American Review*, 26 (1992), pp. 41–50.

are inseparable from who they are. This reflexive approach can encourage the supervisor to recognise that whilst they have the ability and power to guide, mentor, and shape ideas, their own knowledge and understanding has limits.

Most importantly, higher education as an institution must be responsible for reconfiguring supervisory norms. The institutional “queering of supervision” would be deliberately shifting bodies, seating, language, rhythms so that space and practice is no longer only for dominant bodyminds. Aminata noted how her supervisor resisted dominant practices, recognised lived experience as expertise, and was neuroaffirming due to their knowledge and understanding of how neurodivergence impacts experiences of education. However, research shows the kind of institutional training on neurodiversity and race that exists in higher education is often optional or a one-off, tick-box exercise and yields little impact on students’ experiences.²⁶ Training like this may create the illusion that progress is being made while keeping the ableist and colonial systems and structures intact. Instead, universities need to weave anti-racism, cultural humility, and neurodiversity education into the quotidian culture of supervision, rejecting taken-for-granted supervisory practices. Supervisors should be required to complete mandatory modules and workshops before taking on supervisory responsibilities; universities should regularly audit supervision policies against inclusive and anti-discrimination criteria; and student-led feedback loops should be standard practice. The aim is not for supervisors to be experts on neurodivergence and race, but training should promote openness and ‘rhetorical listening’²⁷ and, more generally, better equip supervisors to support a greater diversity of students. There must be institutional accountability, assessing how current supervisory practices contribute to student outcomes such as retention rates for Black and autistic students.

Conclusion

The students in this research have highlighted the ways in which postgraduate supervisory relationships are never neutral transactions, but sites where racial, gendered, and neurotypical norms are continually reproduced and felt in and through students’ bodyminds. Puwar’s notion of disorientation and amplification speak to how Black, autistic students are hyper-visible yet invisible, are over-interpreted, and must navigate somatic and epistemic norms that were never designed with them in mind.

²⁶ Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*.

²⁷ Krista Ratcliffe, *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness* (SIU Press, 2005).

Their direct communication is misread as hostility, their excellence is rewarded with vagueness and a lack of constructive feedback, and any support that they get in the form of reasonable adjustments functions to bring them closer to the institutional norm rather than unsettling it. Supervision therefore becomes a space and mechanism for reaffirming who is imagined to belong. Yet this very same encounter holds transformative potential when it foregrounds mutual respect and responsibility, the possibility of different epistemologies and ways of being, and supervisors' interrogation of their own investments in Whiteness and neuronormativity.

For Black, autistic students, power-conscious supervision does not promise a frictionless relationship free of power dynamics, nor does it prevent them from occupying the position of space invaders. However, it provides a space within the wider higher education institution where they do not feel like infiltrators but rather legitimate co-producers of knowledge. The presence of multiply marginalised students demands that the somatic and epistemic boundaries of the university be dismantled.

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