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Articles on Language and Literature
Literary Criticism and Book Reviews
Association News and Reports

THE COLLEGE LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION



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SPECIAL ISSUE: Blackness and Disability:

This. Is. The. Remix. or I Thought I Told You That We Won't Stop

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About *CLAJ*

I. General Publication Information

The *CLA Journal* (ISSN 0007-8549) is a multilingual peer-reviewed bi-annual publication by the College Language Association. It is issued in March and September of each year. The subscription price for *CLAJ* to non-members and to libraries is \$80.00 yearly in the United States, \$82.50 in Canada, and \$93.00 in other countries. The price of current single copies is \$42.75. The price of single copies of current Special Issues is \$43.75.

II. *CLAJ* Mission Statement

Established in 1957, *CLAJ* is a multilingual, international publication that fosters socially engaged, innovative, and groundbreaking scholarship in language, literature, linguistics, and pedagogy cultivated by the diverse international membership of CLA. *CLAJ* is the voice of a community of scholars, the first in establishing a forum for intellectual discourse among black scholars in language and literary studies. Articles treating the languages and literatures of all nations will be deemed worthy of careful consideration for publication. In keeping with its desire to develop the study of the languages and literatures of Africa and its global diaspora as an important area of scholarship, *CLAJ* is committed to offering critical perspectives and new developments in the analysis of language, literature, and cultural studies representative of the diverse scholarly interests of its members while privileging the African diaspora and transcultural black identities. *CLAJ* neither considers previously published material nor manuscripts submitted elsewhere.

III. CLA Membership Requirement

CLAJ welcomes year-round, mission-appropriate submissions yet limits publication of any work considered to only those authors who have or will satisfy prerequisite membership in the organization.

IV. Formatting Requirements for Essays Submitted for Publication in *CLAJ*

CLAJ requires standard formatting for all essays, including those submitted for consideration in special issues. Submissions that do not adhere to these specifications will not be considered for publication. For regular biannual issues, your anonymous manuscript should be submitted as an email attachment to Dr. Sandra G. Shannon, *CLAJ* Editor, at editor@clascholars.org.

- Manuscripts must be Microsoft Word documents, double spaced, with one-inch margins, and Times New Roman 12 pt. font.
- Manuscripts should be approximately 20-24 pages (7000-8000 words), which exclude footnotes and works cited.
- Formatting and citations should conform to *MLA Handbook* (8th Edition, 2016).
- *CLAJ* requires references in the form of footnotes.

Manuscripts should also be accompanied by a separate additional file that contains

- a cover letter with the author's name, address, email address, telephone number, and professional affiliation.
- an abstract of the essay that does not exceed 250 words formatted as a single-spaced page with the essay title and author's name.
- a biographical sketch of the author in approximately 100 words. (If the work is collaborative, a separate biographical sketch is required for each author.)
- A statement of the author's CLA membership status.

V. Guidelines for Book Reviews and Book Reviewers

CLAJ currently considers unsolicited book reviews for publication and dispatches books to qualified members for solicited reviews.

If you would like to submit an unsolicited book review, suggest a book for review, or request to become a reviewer, please send an email to the *CLAJ* Book Review Editor, Dr. Tosha Sampson-Choma at tchoma@ksu.edu. If, after a week, you have not received an acknowledgment of your query or submission, please query again or write to the senior editor of the *CLAJ* at editor@clascholars.org. Please write "Book Review Query" or "Book Review Submission" in the subject line of the email as applicable.

The book review should

- include a brief summary of the book's central argument.
- offer an assessment of the book's contribution to the existing literature in its field.
- provide a frank evaluation of the book's strengths and weaknesses.
- maintain a collegial and constructive tone.
- adhere to MLA style guidelines.
- be 500-2000 words in length.

VI. Publication Decisions

Upon completion of the external review process and editorial decision, authors will receive prompt communication by email regarding the status of their essay. Direct specific questions regarding the review process to editor@clascholars.org. All decisions are final.

VII. Guidelines for Special Issues

To propose a special issue, prospective guest editors need to

- submit a 500-word abstract describing the issue and its scholarly significance.
- include a list of contributors, their essay titles, and their corresponding abstracts (200-300 words).
- provide a timeline of completion.
- note that the special issue has a 100-page minimum.
- alternately, if the guest editor(s) plans an open call for papers (CFP), they should include a draft of the CFP and information regarding the circulation of the CFP.

Once the special issue is approved, the Guest Editor will lead the process from proposal to publication.

The Guest Editor

- develops and maintains timelines to ensure timely publication.
- oversees the peer review process.
- acts as a point of contact for reviewers and authors.
- copyedits the submitted essays.
- ensures each essay adheres to *CLAJ* formatting requirements (see Section IV).
- compiles the table of contents.
- writes an introduction contextualizing the submissions.
- sends all essays as a group in a zip file of individual Microsoft Word documents to *CLAJ* editor at editor@clascholars.org.
- ensures that the required information described in Section IV accompanies the essays.
- provides evidence to the *CLAJ* Editor that all contributors have paid memberships to CLA
- submits their own biographical sketch (100 words), full name and affiliation, telephone number, email address, and mailing address.

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A PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATION OF COLLEGE TEACHERS OF ENGLISH AND FOREIGN LANGUAGES

The College Language Association, founded in 1937 by a group of Black scholars and educators, is an organization of college teachers of English and foreign languages which serves the academic, scholarly and professional interests of its members and the collegiate communities they represent. Since 1957, the association has published the *CLA Journal*, a peer-reviewed biannual publication featuring scholarly research and reviews of books in the areas of language, literature, linguistics and pedagogy.

The College Language Association . . .

- Fosters high professional standards for teachers of language and literature and promotes productive scholarship among its members;
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Note from the Editor

The publication of issue 64.1 (March 2021) of the *College Language Association Journal* marks the end of my tenure as *CLAJ* Editor! I am especially pleased that the timing of my exit coincides with the journal's current on-time status, its increased global reach, and a checklist of other major enhancements.

As I glance in the rear-view mirror, I am comforted in knowing that the vision I shared with then-CLA President Dr. Mario Chandler (2012-2014) in my October 12, 2013 acceptance has become reality in the impressive caliber, reach, and timeliness of scholarship that *CLAJ* currently publishes. Honored and optimistic that I could make a difference, I fully embraced this position, well aware of the weight of the journal's impressive history. I expressed as much in that email meant to assure Dr. Chandler and my CLA colleagues that I was up to the task:

I have already begun to give some thought to how I'd like to see the journal advance and stay in step with the digital age as well as with the growing body of new literary works on the scene. I am particularly interested in striking a balance between critical essays on more established writers and providing a platform for the critical exploration of a new generation of intellectuals, activists, and creative thinkers. I could not help but notice that the most recent issue of *CLAJ* has *two* essays on Toni Morrison and one on Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin!* I believe that *CLAJ* must reflect the vitality and fluidity in existing and emerging fields--in all genres.

Mission accomplished! For evidence one need only peruse the succession of solid *single* and *special* issues published during my editorship. From issue 56.2 (December 2012) to issue 64.1 (March 2021), *CLAJ* boasts a long and distinguished line of CLA scholarly essays and creative work that speak to the accomplishments of literary giants gone too soon, to the pressing issues of our times, and to unexplored aspects of multiple "languages and literatures of Africa and its global diaspora." I am pleased to note that this trend toward cutting edge CLA scholarship continues with this current landmark special issue, *Blackness and Disability: The Remix*, edited by Dr. Theri Pickens.

When I formally stepped into this role in January 2014, I knew that there would be no honeymoon and that there would be much work ahead. However, that *work* never quite seemed like *work* with the constant support of a stalwart

Sandra G. Shannon

Editorial Board sharing the load. I am grateful for the efforts of each member who ably assisted me in lifting the profile of *CLAJ*.

Finally, I wish my successor, Dr. Vershawn Young, great success at the helm of this venerable journal and pledge to offer my assistance as he navigates the newness of serving as Editor of the *College Language Association Journal*!

Dr. Sandra G. Shannon
Howard University
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Blackness and Disability: The Remix

Therí A. Pickens

In the 1990s, when I wanted to learn the lyrics to various songs, I would purchase or dub a cassette tape so I could listen to the songs over and over again.¹ If I got stuck on a particular verse, I usually pressed rewind. Sometimes, I'd flip the tape over and fast forward, or if the film unwound—as was most often the case—I grabbed a pencil, which allowed me to manually turn the spool to the desired spot on the recording. I was not particularly adept at this. There was a lot of clicking in the recording and, sometimes, I would break the spool of the magnetic tape: “I let my tape rock ‘til my tape popped.”² Of course, I counted myself especially lucky if I found a deluxe single on sale at the now defunct The Wiz, Sam Goody, or Tower Records stores, because the single was guaranteed to have multiple remixes. And the remix promised to radically alter certain parts of the song; often, the remix provided clarity or, at the very least, provided a rap or a new hook that I casually performed with greater facility. In other words, the remix was not only pleasurable, but useful.

And, so it is with the remix you now hold. With all due respect to Babyface, I obviously do remixes.³

This scholarly remix, like its musical counterpart, contorts and transforms the original by adding, altering, and, for some, speeding up or slowing down the pace of the scholarship. As with the remixes of the 1990s, there are definitely samples. Let me explain: In 2011, with the help of his mother, Patricia A. Bell, and his colleagues, Sabine Broeck, Marcelle Haddix, and Steve Taylor, Christopher M. Bell posthumously published *Blackness and Disability: Critical Examinations and Cul-*

¹ The cassette tape is an analog technology. I invoke it here as a way to add granularity to the metaphor of remixes, pinpointing the intensity required of listening, the assiduous study necessitated by certain MCs (in this case, scholars), and the utility of community (since remixes were created by producers, DJs, and other lay people). All of these are part of the scholarly politic of Black Disability Studies, even if not exclusively so.

² My use of The Notorious B.I.G.'s “Juicy” here is deliberate. First, the lyric is appropriate to the action described. Second, “Juicy,” as a song, typifies what I describe in the rest of the text. It samples an original, Mtume's 1982 hit, “Juicy Fruit,” and was remixed when breakout star Sharaya J. performed her own version of “Juicy” on Fox's *The Four: Battle for Stardom* in 2018.

³ In March 2020, Babyface and Teddy Riley engaged in a musical battle on social media platforms. Teddy Riley played a clip of Janet Jackson's “I Get Lonely” remix featuring Blackstreet to which Babyface quipped “I don't do remixes” shadily insinuating that they were of lesser value to the battle than songs that were produced as originals. I reference this jocular moment because it is now and forever should be in the cultural ether when we talk about remixes.

tural Interventions. (I deliberately name them as a scholarly politic that highlights labor often rendered invisible.) The collection was the first of its kind, marshalling Bell's trademark political energy, wit, and wry humor into a collection of essays that highlighted some of the main concerns that continue to permeate the burgeoning field of Black Disability Studies. Influenced in many ways by Bell's work, in 2017, I edited a special issue of *African American Review*, also entitled "Blackness and Disability." That editorial project felt akin to a posthumous *festschriften* because it also allowed us to extend conversations originating out of Bell's original *Blackness and Disability*.⁴ This current collection, *Blackness and Disability: The Remix*, adds to and deepens the ongoing conversations about Blackness and disability. These topics include, but are not limited to, theorizing about Black Disability Studies and interpretive strategies;⁵ Black women's mental health;⁶ the afterlives of slavery, including the carceral state;⁷ the disabled lives/deaths of prominent Black figures;⁸ connections between Black communities and other communities of color;⁹ the possibility of liberation while being Black and disabled;¹⁰ the stigma of disability and its relationship to racialization processes;¹¹ the repercussions of U.S. military action on Black disabled people;¹² and the presence of disability in Black music.¹³ You will notice that the footnotes here provide information about scholars who have produced similar work in the two previous volumes of *Blackness and Disability*. I invite you to theorize from above and below.

⁴ I refuse to say that Bell began these conversations in his volume because the origins of the field are, as with most fields, non-linear. I make this case in the introduction to the special issue in *African American Review*. Other scholars also productively make this case as well. See Bailey and Mobley, and Pickens, "Blue Blackness, Black Blueness." See also Dr. Anna Hinton's work in this volume.

⁵ I will only highlight the chapters and articles from the *Blackness and Disability* volumes here to trace the conversations therein. Each of the articles and chapters of the volumes proposes a set of interpretive strategies quite frankly. Rather than list them all here, I'll pinpoint two that explicitly rethink popular authors and common interpretive strategies. See Lyle, Timothy S., "Tryin' to Scrub that 'Death Pussy' Clean Again;" and Schalk, Sami, "Interpreting Disability Metaphor."

⁶ See Jarman, Michelle, "Coming up from Underground;" Gill and Erevelles, "The Absent Presence of Elsie Lacks;" and Orem, Sarah, "(Un)necessary Procedures."

⁷ See Jackson, Cassandra, "Visualizing Slavery;" and Mollow, Anna, "Unvictimized."

⁸ See Bolaki, "Challenging Invisibility"

⁹ Pickens, "Pinning Down the Phantasmagorical" and Mitchell, Ned, "Sexual, Ethnic, Disabled, and National Identities in the 'Borderlands'."

¹⁰ McRuer, "Submissive and Non-Complaint;" Hilton, Leon J., "Avonte's Law;" Tyler Jr., Dennis, "Jim Crow's Disabilities;" and Brune, Jeffrey A., "Blind Like Me."

¹¹ Bell, Chris, "'Could This Happen to You?'"

¹² Drazen, Carlos Clarke, "Both Sides of the Two-Sided Coin."

¹³ Bailey, Moya, "'The Illest'"

There is something you should know about this volume. Its completion was shaped by experiences of disability. Typically, edited volumes—whether books or special issues of journals—usually require three to five years to complete. The editor must propose a special issue, create a call for papers or solicit contributions, receive and review submissions, await reviewers' input, cohere and distribute submission reviews, receive and review revisions, create an introduction, review copy-edits and page proofs, and publicize the publication. Generally speaking, the process is arduous. In the intersectional analysis of Blackness and disability, the process must also contend with the way structural and institutional racism and ableism shape the scholarship available. For instance, when writing about Blackness and disability, scholars often have to justify the presence of that scholarship and its urgency in the scholarly community. Tenure and promotion committees, as well as curious and skeptical colleagues can form a cadre of people who do not understand the fields or histories enough to affirm a scholar's commitment to the work. Even their lukewarm support can be damaging. When power dynamics do not favor the colleague in question, this becomes even more fraught territory. If one's pedagogy is marked by a desire for equity, their classroom tends toward "universal design," or a classroom governed by the idea that accessibility for faculty and students should be provided at the beginning, not accommodated. At times, this commitment to equity angers faculty, staff, and students for various reasons ranging from internalized ableism and white supremacy to the fear that unfamiliarity with these concepts reflects poorly on one's reputation. Each of these instances curtails the possibility of discussing the intersections of Blackness and disability, let alone producing scholarship about these intersections.

Moreover, the fields of Black Studies and Disability Studies often include scholars whose daily lives are shaped by experiences with disability.¹⁴ Given the structural and institutional barriers that confront these fields (some of which are described above), there is often a pipeline issue when putting these fields in conversation. That is, scholars who choose Blackness and disability as topics of study have to fight for the validity of their field much earlier in their careers than most others. This often results in a lack of access to opportunities that move a scholar through career milestones: graduations, job security, tenure, promotion, alternative academic careers, etc. So, the typical pipeline for those producing scholarship about disability—whether they are undergraduates, graduate students, assistant professors, associate professors with tenure, or full professors—has gaps, deferrals, and lacunae. To be fair, there are alternative pathways into and out of the academy,

¹⁴ Please note that I avoid suggesting that all or many of these scholars identify as disabled. First, that isn't true; we have to acknowledge the scholars whose lives are shaped by experiences of disability because they affirm a political commitment to access and disability-positive thinking. Second, embodiment of an identity category does not equal consciousness about that identity category.

as well as careers that shape academic thought from the outside. I simply highlight the so-called traditional path, since it is a prism that can allow us to see some of the others. I would be remiss if I did not point out that, alongside the issues of scholarly access, the bodymind itself also can inhibit the possibility of creating scholarship. As Diana Paulin and Julia Miele Rodas discuss in this volume, the methods of scholarly production and publication assume a bodymind that may or may not be possible. Such circumstances require that a scholar find alternatives to normative scholarly production or be absent from the scholarship altogether. Clearly, the latter becomes a loss for all of us. Unfortunately, this volume has been shaped by such absences; in the future, we hope to be able to provide a space for these scholars and their scholarship.¹⁵

In one of my solo projects, I note that “I am profoundly guided by a distrust of linearity.”¹⁶ This skepticism honors the fact that progressive linearity creates an orderly and neat narrative where one may not truly exist. One of the reasons for our decisions to pursue “unruly narratives” is the way that disability affects time. That is, living a life affected by disability often shifts the parameters of time: elongating, shortening, warping, etc. As some of the authors in this volume know all too well, the body and mind demand care, regardless of publication schedules. In fact, some authors who are not in the volume know this all too well, which is why we still welcome and support the scholarship of those whose work is not present here. We desire what is to come. As Imani Perry observes of Lorraine Hansberry’s writing, which was shaped by illness, or what we now know was her impending death from pancreatic cancer: “Knowing what I do about pain (I have lived with chronic diseases for nearly half of my life), it shapes how I read the works Lorraine left from this time. There are many bits and pieces. But the fragments are something much more than their incompleteness. We cannot dismiss these artifacts that were not designated ‘done’ as she lay dying. Lorraine worked and witnessed her own diminishing faculty. She saw in it a perverse poetry.”¹⁷ Perry’s rumination clarifies how chronic or ongoing illness should not be viewed as the segue to an ending, a pre-emptive requiem. Instead, the undone work can be acknowledged as part of a style that, afterwards, comes to be known as “late,” but should also be viewed as part of an ongoing oeuvre.¹⁸ This volume does not include work that is undone, but it is

¹⁵ This project will be published after the advent of COVID-19, which means that most people in the world – because of the virus – will have experienced some proximity to disability, but as public intellectuals Imani Barbarin, Vilissa Thompson, and Dustin Gibson make clear (mostly on their Twitter feeds) this has not resulted in disability justice just yet.

¹⁶ Pickens, *Black Madness: Mad Blackness*, xi.

¹⁷ Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 182.

¹⁸ Within this chapter, Perry quotes Edward Said’s *On Late Style* to join her thoughts about Lorraine Hansberry’s work.

shaped by that which could not be completed in time and those whose labor won't appear here, but elsewhere. So, this is only part of the conversation.

We have collaborated deliberately with *College Language Association Journal* to have these conversations. As the publication arm of College Language Association, this journal continues to intervene in a history that acknowledges that the Modern Language Association was once segregated by law and practice and still infuses some of these outdated cultural norms in their conference and associated publications. This is the hallmark of white supremacy: It finds increasingly clever places to hide. As a result of such a history, *College Language Association Journal* speaks from a specific scholastic place. First, the publication demands the kind of rigor engendered by a respect for Black culture and life. The pursuit of rigor is not solely about the accuracy of the analysis (though that is prioritized), but also attends to the framework and analytical repercussions. In other words, it matters what the natural corollaries are when one reaches a conclusion. It matters also which scholars are marshalled in support of one's analysis. Second, students and faculty at Historically Black Colleges and Universities represent *CLAJ*'s largest audience, which means that the publication participates in field formation in ways that differ from scholars at predominantly white institutions. Whereas scholars in predominantly white institutions sometimes labor in siloed conditions as the only person of color conducting research on historically marginalized communities, scholars at HBCUs craft the field in a different cultural and intellectual landscape. When thinking about the discipline of English in particular, this difference often means that one's colleagues are not oblivious to, disinterested in, or ignorant of the ways that scholarship carries political valence. This also results in scholars being able to understand the connections between categories of social identity, such as race and disability, various time periods, and other people groups within the literary canon. Third, *CLAJ* is unapologetic about its endorsement of and belief in Black scholars and Black scholarship. The freedom to write under these circumstances increases exponentially because of the support that accompanies these endeavors. As a result, the essays that follow rest in the complexity of Blackness and disability, its messiness, and some of the uncomfortable truths with which we must reckon.

I have taken the prerogative as editor to organize this special issue into three parts. The first section is comprised of four essays. It focuses on various conversations that are internal to Black Disability Studies and its pedagogies regarding how to read and interpret the presence of Blackness and disability in tandem. The second set contains three essays that examine intra-racial concerns about Black disability; and the third set of three essays grapples with interracial conversations about Blackness and disability. The first section could act as a primer for the other two, especially if one is unfamiliar with the field. Herein lies the remix: The

first section is in deliberate conversation with the work that precedes it in *African American Review* and Christopher M. Bell's posthumous edited collection. I parse the second and third sections to make a modest point: There are some theoretical, cultural, and literary concerns that arise when disability is a Black thang and others that arise when we locate Black disability in interracial spaces.¹⁹ Though the organization allows for one to read from beginning to end, it does not demand it. The essays are not meant to be digested as progressions, but rather as Venn Diagrams: overlapping, underscoring, and complicating each other. I would encourage readers to put these articles in useful and productive tension with each other. For instance, Anna Hinton's genealogy of Black feminist disability scholarship queries the Black masculine horror creations of Victor LaValle and Jordan Peele in Michelle Jarman's essay. Kianna Middleton and Sami Schalk are engaged in a wonderful debate about childhood disability. Charles Nero's think piece troubles the easy overcoming narratives and their repercussions, alongside Michelle Hartman's careful delineation of a character wrestling with such narratives. Siobhan Senier challenges us all to think about how Indigenous Disability Studies exists alongside Black Disability Studies, another mode of understanding racialization that complements Tamir Williams work on self-identification. Delia Steverson offers another way to read the late Toni Morrison and August Wilson's minor characters, a proposition that the Rodas/Paulin interview takes seriously. This volume's book reviews include recent works that are germane to the topics at hand. We hope that you'll think of this as a useful bibliography.

As with all of my work, this project owes a debt of gratitude to my communities that support and validate the study of Blackness and disability. They help make this kind of scholarship a reality. I am immensely grateful to Sandra Shannon, editor of *College Language Association Journal* and the other board members for entrusting me with our readership and giving this issue a chance to flourish. I appreciate the authors in this volume for their dedication to rigor, excellence, and craft. We are much enriched by their labor. Thank you especially to Shanna Benjamin, Baltasar Fra-Molinero, Meta Duewa Jones, and Susan Burch, without whom I would have been waylaid without advice and assistance. A special thank you to Brittney Cooper, whose work in *Eloquent Rage* and *Beyond Respectability* and gracious encouragement helped me retain focus and vision. Much appreciation to Tikia K. Hamilton for her wonderful editing eye; you made us all sound more like ourselves. I end with a final note, a remix of my own words, influenced by Bell's collection and the introduction to the special issue in *African American Review*: We know in our flesh what hesitates to be articulated; we pin down the phantasmagorical; we wrestle for it because we got to...

¹⁹ I make this point in my other work. See Pickens, *Black Madness: Mad Blackness*.

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On Fits, Starts, and Entry Points: The Rise of Black Disability Studies

Anna Hinton

While most disability activists and scholars were still praising the Disability Rights Movement and the academic discipline of Disability Studies for its diversity, in 2006, Christopher M. Bell upbraided the field for its so-called diversity in an essay in Lennard J. Davis's second edition of *The Disability Studies Reader* (2006). Bell insisted that:

[I]t is disingenuous to keep up the pretense that the field is an inclusive one when it is not. On that score, I would like to concede the failure of Disability Studies to engage issues of race and ethnicity in a substantive capacity, thereby entrenching whiteness as its constitutive underpinning. In short, I want to call a shrimp a shrimp and acknowledge Disability Studies for what it is, White Disability Studies.¹

Though Bell's criticism ruffled many feathers, he was hardly the first Disability Studies scholar to notice the whiteness of the field. That same year, in a special issue on race, ethnicity, and disability in literature in *MELUS*, Jennifer C. James and Cynthia Wu pointed out that the field had not meaningfully engaged with race and ethnicity.² Scholarship that substantially engaged race and disability appeared in fits and spurts, and even after Bell's critique of the field's whiteness continued only to trickle in until the posthumous publication of *Blackness and Disability: Critical Examinations and Cultural Interventions* (2010) and the emergence of critical race and disability scholars like Nirmala Erelles, Michelle Jarman, Sami Schalk, and Theri Pickens, to name a few. There has now been a more robust and consistent body of scholarship that examines the intersections of race and disability, culminating in the emergent subfield of Black Disability Studies.

For understandable reasons, Christopher M. Bell's essay has been understood as the genesis, the entry point of Black Disability Studies. Referencing Bell's intervention as the beginning, however, presents multiple problems: It establishes Black Disability Studies as beholden to whiteness by situating it as a reaction and response to exclusion from "white disability studies," reducing its contributions to paradigm revisions predicated on Black disabled people's exclusion. It fails to recognize Black Disability Studies' interventions as innovative, creative, and generative in their own right. Additionally, as Bell's essay suggests, Black folks have been

¹ Bell, Christopher, "Introducing White Disability Studies: A Modest Proposal," 275.

² See Jennifer C. James and Cynthia Wu "Editors' Introduction: Race, Ethnicity, Disability, and Literature: Intersections and Interventions" (2006).

writing about disability even before the emergence of Disability Studies as a field. This is especially the case with Black Feminist thought. All too often, however, this body of writing is either ignored or only consulted for its theorization of intersectionality as a critical methodology, yet even Black Feminist intersectional analyses are ghettoized, with much scholarship remaining limited to discussions of race, gender, and class, but not disability.³

Black Disability Studies scholars are currently working to situate Black women's critical and theoretical interventions within Disability Studies. Therí Pickens, for instance, notes that "one could trace the concerns of wellness, sociogenic psychosis, and physical difference (among others) through [Black] feminist literature both critical and creative."⁴ In a series of critical essays in *Lateral*, Sami Schalk, Jina B. Kim, and Julie Minich suggest the same. Julie Minich contends "efforts to resist the pathologization of non-normative bodies and minds in communities of color do not always take place under the name of disability scholarship/activism, even as they deploy what I am naming as a critical Disability Studies methodology."⁵ For Schalk, Kim, and Minich, disability as methodology shifts the attention away from disability as an "object of study" to a "mode of analysis" that recovers the bodies of work that Disability Studies, as a field, has ignored, precisely because it does not explicitly identify as such. For instance, in her book *Disability and Difference in Global Contexts* (2011), Nirmala Erevelles recovers and reclaims Hortense Spillers's seminal essay, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" (1987) as a text that theorizes Blackness and disability; subsequently, Erevelles builds on Spillers's work to outline how Blackness and disability are mutually constitutive. More recently, in her essay for *The Cambridge Companion of Literature and Disability* (2017), Michelle Jarman roots her discussion of race and disability in Black and women of color feminist criticism; Sami Schalk uses "crip theory," or the radical, in-your-face approach to disability identity, politics, and scholarship that is influenced by and in conversation with queer theory; in *Bodyminds Reimagined* (2018), Schalk also uses Black Feminist criticism to analyze disability in Black women's speculative fiction; and Moya Bailey and Izzetta Autumn Mobley articulate and model a Black Feminist Disability Studies approach to re-examine Black women's writing on health and medicine.

³ I am specifically considering how disability studies scholars have adopted intersectionality as a critical methodology that can be used to analyze disability but fail to see how Black feminist scholars themselves have already theorized disability in their intersectional analysis. Therí Pickens's "Octavia E. Butler and the Novel Aesthetics," Sami Schalk's *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction*, and Moya Bailey and Izzetta Mobley's "Work In The Intersections: A Black Feminist Disability Framework" all examine how Black women write about the intersections of race, class, gender, and disability.

⁴ Pickens, Therí, "Blue Blackness, Black Blueness: Making Sense of Blackness and Disability," 95.

⁵ Minich, Julie, "Enabling Whom? Critical Disability Studies Now."

Like them, I am interested in identifying lines of disability thought in Black Feminist writing and establishing that Black Feminist Theory has always been in conversations with Disability Studies. Instead of trying to place fields in conversation, however, I argue that they already are, or rather that Black women have been having their own conversations about disability on their own terms. Furthermore, these conversations are an alternative and more appropriate entry point for considering the lineage of our current moment in Black Disability Studies. Acknowledging this lineage of thought allows us to undo whiteness as the constitutive underpinning of Disability Studies and further clarify how Black Feminist thought engages disability. I divide this essay into three parts. First, I provide an overview of how Critical Disability Studies emerged as a field and where Black Disability Studies usually enters. The first section underscores Christopher Bell's contention that Disability Studies promotes whiteness as its constituent underpinning. By reorienting Black Disability Studies' emergence away from Bell's essay to earlier Black Feminist writing, I do not wish to undermine the necessary interventions he and other contemporary Black Disability scholars have made, especially through their direct engagement of Disability Studies theories and methods, particularly their critiques of ableism in Black Studies. Therefore, in the second section, I dive into Black Feminism's uneasy relationship with disability, focusing primarily on the ableism entrenched in Black Feminist thought. Rather than use Black feminist critics' ableism to dismiss Black women's writing as irrelevant to disability conversations, I consider the exigencies that Blackness and disabilities' enmeshed history place on Black Feminist academics. In so doing, I also underscore the need to disengage ableism and embrace a radical, unrespectable politics of disability. Finally, I craft an alternative genealogy of Black Disability Studies.

A Brief History of White Disability Studies

Disability Studies grew out of activist movements in the United States and the United Kingdom in the late 1980s and emerged as a field of study in the 1990s. Inspired by the legislative gains of the 1950s and 1960s for Black civil rights, disability rights activist lawyers fought for legislation that would recognize disabled people as a minority group with rights in need of protection. For example, section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which "made it illegal for any federal agency, public university, defense or other federal contractor, or any other institution or activity that received federal funding to discriminate against anyone 'solely by reason of . . . handicap,'"⁶ and similar legislation presented early wins. This activist work culminated in the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), which protected disabled people from discrimination and required employers to provide

⁶ Shapiro, Joseph P. *No Pity: People with Disabilities Forging a New Civil Rights Movement*, 65.

reasonable accommodations for disabled employees. The language of the ADA reflected an important shift from the biomedical model understanding of disability as “an individual misfortune” that “medicine can and should treat, cure, or at least prevent” to the social model understanding of disability.⁷ As such, disability was defined as “the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organisation which takes no or little account of the people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from participation in the mainstream of social activities,” along with the social, cultural, and linguistic constructions and narratives that people ascribe to bodies.⁸ From there, disability became an identity category and disabled people an oppressed minority group. This shift from the medical model of disability to the social model of disability not only reflected the new critical consciousness of pride and disability rights activists, but also became the main analytic frame for Disability Studies as an academic field.

Disability Studies emerged as an academic field in the early to mid-90s. While medicine and social sciences were long interested in studying disability, they largely approached disability from biomedical models. However, scholars in the emergent field of Disability Studies embraced the social model. Consequently, early work in the humanities, such as Lennard J. Davis’s *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (1995), Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (1997), and Sharon Snyder and David T. Mitchell’s *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (2000) focused on unpacking distorted, harmful representations of disabled people. Their major interventions reveal that, while it is rare for a work’s protagonist to have a disability, writers saturate their novels with disabled figures who serve as tropes to elicit pity or signify evil, and who are then dismissed as the plot moves toward normalization. For them, the novel is a literary form that relies on disability to reproduce “normalcy.” As the field developed, scholars began to merge theories and methodologies used in Disability Studies with those popular in Queer and Feminist theory, demonstrating how ableism, or the preference for the able body, is imbricated in how we understand gender and sexuality as socio-historical constructions.⁹ By 2005, the field moved from what Lennard J. Davis considered the “fringes” of academia to what former MLA president Michael Bérubé declared a “discipline emerged.”¹⁰ Yet, as Christopher M. Bell discerned, the

⁷ Davis, Lennard J., *The Disability Studies Reader*, 161

⁸ Barnes, Colin, and G. Mercer, *Disability*, 11.

⁹ See Robert McRuer’s *Crip Theory* (2006) and Alison Kafer’s *Feminist, Crip, Queer* (2013).

¹⁰ Davis, Lennard, “Crips Strike Back: The Rise of Disability Studies,” 500; Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie, “Disability Studies: A Field Emerged,” 915.

field that emerged was largely dominated by white scholars who wrote about white experiences with disability.¹¹

Critical Race and Disability scholars have since exposed the gaping silences, omissions, and conundrums that have resulted from the inattention to race in Disability Studies. For example, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson revealed that, whereas disabled characters in literature are typically portrayed as pitiable and weak, Black women writers like Ann Petry and Toni Morrison represent Black disabled women as powerful and complex.¹² Anna Mollow and Julie Ngue argue that Black women's experience with disability complicates the social model's desire to position disability as a positive identity category, as well as their desire to reject, completely, the medical model of disability.¹³ Nirmala Erelles has demonstrated how race and disability are mutually constitutive, as Blackness is constructed as a disability to mark its inferiority, a positioning that in turn leads to social treatment and conditions that produce actual impairments.¹⁴ Leroy Moore has pointed out that early disability pride activism in California did not extend to Black communities, largely because the organizations were white-dominated.¹⁵ For these reasons and more, in 2013, Sami Schalk "disidentified" with the larger field of Disability Studies in her "creative-critical" paper "Coming to Claim Crip: Disidentification with/in Disability Studies."¹⁶ Subsequently, by 2015, the body of work on Blackness and disability demonstrated that attention to race was no longer "a marginalized special-topic," but rather "a crucial part of all disability studies...and Black and Africana Studies."¹⁷ *African American Review's* 50th anniversary special issue on Blackness and disability (2017) cemented this body of work. Resultingly, the special issue clarified the concerns that would constitute Black Disability Studies as its own subfield.

Critical approaches in Black Disability Studies do not merely sprinkle a little Blackness into the mix of Disability Studies' prevailing arguments--this understanding of race and disability only results in a superficial and limited analysis of race and disability that has been the norm. As Therí Pickens argues, Black Disabil-

¹¹ Bell, Christopher, *Blackness and Disability: Critical Examinations and Cultural Interventions*, 3.

¹² Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*, 105-106.

¹³ See Anna Mollow's "When Black Women start Going on Prozac": Race, Gender, and Mental Illness in Meri Nana-Ama Danquah's *Willow Weep for Me* and Julie Ngue's *Critical Conditions: Illness and Disability in Francophone African and Caribbean Women's Writing* (2012).

¹⁴ See *Disability and Difference in Global Contexts: Enabling a Transformative Body Politic* (2011).

¹⁵ See "Developing and Reflecting on a Black Disability Studies Pedagogy: Work from the National Black Disability Coalition" (2015).

¹⁶ See "Coming to Claim Crip: Disidentification with/in Disability Studies" (2013).

¹⁷ Dunhamn, Jane, et al., "Developing and Reflecting on a Black Disability Studies Pedagogy: Work from the National Black Disability Coalition."

ity Studies demands that we “reach outside of both Black Studies and Disability Studies...to create new paradigms.”¹⁸ However, an important part of this “representational detective work” is to recover Black histories of disability. Though there is much commendable work that attempts to locate the Black presence in the mainstream narrative of disability rights and activism, these efforts prove problematic for several reasons. First, as Joseph Shapiro notes in his history of the disability rights movement, the “disability movement is a mosaic movement” constituted of mostly discrete incidents of protest, such as the 504 sit-ins and the capitol crawl,¹⁹ but most of the gains occurred through “stealth,” wherein lawyer-activists quietly pushed to secure disabled people’s rights through legislative gains.²⁰ Secondly, many of the disability rights activist-lawyers were conservative white men. Lawyers who were instrumental in passing the ADA were part of Ronald Reagan’s National Council on Disability (NCD), formally known as the National Council on the Handicapped, and the ADA was passed under George H.W. Bush’s administration. Joseph Shapiro explains, “[Bush], too, had dealt with the pain of disease and disability in his family.”²¹ While everyone has benefited from disability rights, and most will benefit from the continued securing and execution of disability rights, the fact is, disability was and continues to be the one minority category that otherwise privileged white men can enter into and therein lies its “diversity.” Among activists, racial inclusion often appears as an afterthought by those who were largely taught to consider Black people enemies, as one participant in the 504 sit-ins bravely admits.²² This most recently became apparent after George H.W. Bush’s death, when Black disability influencers, activists, and intellectuals exhorted white ones to reframe their praise of Bush as a disability rights advocate, while ignoring how his policies and positions have been detrimental to Black communities, such as his veto of the 1990s Civil Rights Act and his refusal to respond to the HIV/AIDS crisis.

Critical Disability Studies scholarship, especially that produced earlier in the field’s development, reflects its origins: There is/has been a focus on white men

¹⁸ Pickens, Theri, “Outliers and Out Right Lies; or How We ‘Do’ Black Disability Studies.”

¹⁹ Both are monumental events in disability rights history. In April of 1977, to demand enforcement of section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, disability activists in California locked themselves in federal buildings. In March of 1990, to demand passage of the ADA, disability activists protested at the U.S. Capitol, some deserting their mobility to aids to “crawl” up the Capitol’s steps. For more on the 504 sit-in, see Susan Schweik’s “Lomax’s Matrix: Disability, Solidarity, and the Black Power of 504,” and for more on both the 504 sit-in and the Capitol crawl, see Joseph Shapiro’s *No Pity: People with Disabilities Forging a New Civil Rights Movement* and Kim Neilsen’s *A Disability History of the United States*.

²⁰ Shapiro, 117.

²¹ Shapiro, 119.

²² Schweik, Susan, “Lomax’s Matrix: Disability, Solidarity, and the Black Power of 504.”

with physical or sensory disabilities who can take for granted access to quality, medical care unbiased with regard to racism and sexism. Consequently, some of the foundational tenets of Disability Studies are insufficient to grapple with many Black experiences of disability. For instance, as Sami Schalk and Akemi Nishida argue, in order to theorize Blackness, Disability Studies has to make space for issues of trauma, non-apparent disabilities, violence, illness, and disease.²³ I add, along with scholars like Schalk, Jina B. Kim, and Julie Minich, that current paradigms in Disability Studies make it difficult to identify how racial and ethnic minorities have examined and theorized disability, leading to gross erasures in the archive.

“A metaphysical dilemma I haven’t yet conquered”: Black Feminist Thought, Ableism, and the Academy²⁴

Admittedly, establishing a lineage of the emergence of Black Disability Studies is tricky, perhaps not wholly possible, and, as Theri Pickens suggests, possibly undesirable as we “elide the important details, nuances, and complexities at our own peril.”²⁵ Part of these complexities include the demands of inhabiting certain bodies and minds and how these ontological positions frustrate linear narratives of progress. Scholarship about and produced by Black/disabled people is often completed in fits and starts. Our present moment in Black Disability Studies did not emerge until the 2010’s, as a peer gently reminded me, because of the academic pipeline and the realness of “C.P. time.”²⁶ Here, C.P. time simultaneously refers to the colloquialism “colored people’s” time and the academic phrase “crip time,” the former preceding the latter in use. Both terms denote a refusal to accede to demands of punctuality that are tethered to the preference for normative embodiment and capitalistic demands for productivity, but they both also speak to the precarity of Black/disabled life. On the one hand, prior to this decade, some of the scholars whose work has been instrumental to this contemporary moment in Black Disability Studies were still at an early place in their careers. Some were dealing with the vicissitudes that occupying the intersections of race, gender, and disability places on one’s scholarly production, including circumstances that have

²³ Dunham, Jane, et al., “Developing and Reflecting on a Black Disability Studies Pedagogy: Work from the National Black Disability Coalition.”

²⁴ From N’tozake Shange’s *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow Is Enuf* (1976), 59.

²⁵ Pickens, Theri, “Blue Blackness, Black Blueness: Making Sense of Blackness and Disability,” 96.

²⁶ I say “realness” here to both validate colored and crip time as an ontological reality and epistemological frame as well as to signify on the (Black) colloquialisms of keeping it real, or being honest and transparent, and “shit got real,” meaning that an event or concern has reached a peak level of urgency.

brought scholarship to an astounding halt: For instance, Carlos Clarke Drazen and Christopher M. Bell are both dead.

Finally, one must contend with the ableism in Black Studies, including Black Feminist Studies. Disability Studies scholars have rightly criticized Critical Race scholars, including (at times singling out) Black Feminists for their silence around issues of disability and/or their perpetuation of ableism. For instance, Sami Schalk critiques Black and white feminists' use of ableist metaphors in their writing, and, while Douglas C. Baynton concedes that disability has been attributed to minority groups to justify their oppression, he goes on to point out that, "[r]arely have oppressed groups denied that disability is an adequate justification for social and political inequality. Thus, while disabled people can be considered one of the minority groups historically assigned inferior status and subjected to discrimination, disability has functioned for all such groups as a sign of and justification for inferiority."²⁷ Activist, educator, and Krip Hop co-founder Leroy Moore regularly lambasts Critical Race scholars and Black Feminists on his social media platforms because of their inattention to disability. While, at times, Moore's critiques leave the bitter taste of misogynoir on the tongue, social worker, activist, and public intellectual Vilisa Thompson and blogger and influencer Imani Barbarin have criticized Black women's ableism, while acknowledging Black Feminist contributions to disability thought.

Ableism in Black women's writing and thought is part of a politics of respectability that ensured Black women's survival in the academy and world at large but has prohibited a radical liberation politics. At the same time, I agree with Moya Bailey and Izetta Mobley that we need to have more nuanced conversation on why Black Studies scholars, including Black Feminist scholars, have been reluctant to identify as disabled. Indeed, Evelyn M. Hammonds touched on this issue twenty years ago when she wrote, regarding Black women's sexuality and HIV/AIDS:

[C]ontemporary black feminist theorists have not taken up this project in part because of their own status in the academy. Reclaiming the body as well as subjectivity is a process that black feminist theorists in the academy must go through themselves while they are doing the work of producing theory. Black feminist theorists are themselves engaged in a process of fighting to reclaim the body --the maimed, immoral, black female body--which can be and is still being used by others to discredit them as producers of knowledge and as speaking subjects.²⁸

²⁷ Baynton, Douglas, "Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History," 18.

²⁸ Hammonds, Evelyn M., "Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence," 99.

What Hammonds identifies here, though she does not label it as such, is that Black feminist scholars fail to speak about disability because they are working through internalized ableism (reclaiming “maimed” bodies), even as they remain concerned about how ableism and misogynoir might be mobilized against them in academia. Writing in the same argumentative vein as Baynton, Bailey and Mobley also note, “it is precisely because of Black Studies’ deep familiarity with stigmatized embodiment that scholars in these fields have not more substantively taken up disability as core to their work, or more comprehensively engaged Disability Studies.”²⁹ Publications such as *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life* (2011), *Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia* (2012), and *Academic Ableism: Disability and Higher Education* (2017) suggest Black women’s fears are warranted. In *Mad at School*, Margaret Price notes that disability, particularly cognitive disability, is almost antithetical to the academy. Jess Waggoner, Elizabeth Donaldson, and others have even critiqued Disability Studies scholars of sanism in their attempts to establish themselves as fit for full participation in the body politic and social inclusion.³⁰ The contributors in *Presumed Incompetent* candidly discuss how to navigate academia when those within assume that you lack the intelligence and merit to deserve a space within it. These women are working against a set of ideas that have negatively tethered Blackness and disability, particularly mental, cognitive, and intellectual disability, and constructed the Black female body as particularly disorderly and unruly. Black Feminists have mostly navigated ableism and misogynoir in the academy and world at large through a contortion act of the body, mind, and spirit. These scholars have and often continue to embrace performances of respectability that distance them from disability, as well as “hypersexuality” and queerness, all in an effort to protect themselves. However, as Black feminist scholar Brittney Cooper argues in *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women* (2017), “if we fail to move beyond respectability, we will continue to miss critical parts of the story.”³¹ Put another way, this time in the words of Audre Lorde, “Your silence will not protect you.”³²

It is imperative that Black Feminists more directly embrace a radical disability politics. Therí Pickens poses the rhetorical questions: “If we call out our dead, how many of them in [B]lack studies have had the end of their lives shaped by expe-

²⁹ Bailey, Moya, and Izetta Autumn Mobley, “Work in the Intersections: A Black Feminist Disability Framework,” 5.

³⁰ See Jess Waggoner’s “‘Oh Say Can You ___’: Race and Mental Disability in Performances of Citizenship” and Elizabeth Donaldson and Catherine Prendergast. “Introduction: Disability and Emotion: ‘There’s No Crying in Disability Studies!’”

³¹ Cooper, Brittney C. *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women*, 8.

³² Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, 43.

periences with disability and chronic illness? How many scholars and cultural producers currently live lives shaped by experiences with disability”³³? The evidence suggests that all too many do: For instance, according to the Centers for Disease control, a disproportionate 25% of Black people are disabled (CDC). Meanwhile, there are works such as Audre Lorde’s *The Cancer Journals* (1980), *A Burst of Light* (1988), bell hooks’s *Sisters of the Yam* (1993), Evelyn White’s *The Black Women’s Health Book* (1990), and Diane R. Brown and Verna M. Keith’s *In and Out of Our Right Minds: The Mental Health of African American Women* (2003), to name a few; and, tragically, cancer has prematurely ended the careers of Black Feminists such as Nellie Y. McKay, Lorraine Hansberry, Audre Lorde, Toni Cade Bambara, June Jordan, Bebe Moore Campbell, Claudia Tate, Loyalie King, and Barbara Christian, to name a few and in no particular order. Blackness and disability are so deeply enmeshed that it is difficult to write about one without, in some way, touching upon the other. Consequently, much Black Feminist writing addresses disparate health outcomes in the Black community and paths to wellness for Black people. Health and disability emerge as prominent themes in Black women’s literature and criticism. Authors like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Octavia E. Butler have produced entire oeuvres that mostly feature disabled protagonists and/or main characters. Thus, as Pickens asserts, “Without reading scholars or cultural producers in exclusively biographical terms, their work remains indebted to ideas about ability and disability in such a way that they become participants in this intellectual endeavor.”³⁴ For the rest of this essay, not only will I bolster Pickens’s claim that scholars and cultural producers are participants in Black Disability Studies, but also argue that ideas created, developed, and now central to Black Feminist thought can and should be considered as originating points for our current moment of Black Disability Studies scholarship.

“When and Where I Enter”: Black Feminist Origins of Black Disability Thought³⁵

Many Black women have critically examined disability in their literature for decades now. For example, in Octavia E. Butler’s *Parable of the Talents* (1998), the author describes how the protagonist, Lauren Olamina, welcomes her hyperempathy or organic delusional syndrome, an illness caused by her mother’s drug use. Though the rest of the characters in Butler’s dystopian United States view Lauren’s ability to feel what she perceives to be other people’s pain as disabling or as indications of weakness, Lauren uses her impaired body as a site for knowledge to

³³ Pickens, “Blue Blackness, Black Blueness,” 96.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ From Anna Julia Cooper’s *A Voice from the South* (1892) and Paula Giddings’s foundational text *When and where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (1984).

craft her Earthseed religion. Similarly, the character of Clarice “Precious” Jones in Sapphire’s *Push* (1995) recognizes the normalizing processes, such as standardized tests, that “paint a picture of [her] an’ [her] muver--[her] whole family [as] more than dumb, [as] invisible.”³⁶ She knows that what teachers, social workers, and doctors put in “the file” about her life and health serves as a dominant narrative about her, a narrative that marks her as mentally, physically, and socially unhealthy, and a narrative that determines whether she will have access to sorely needed resources. Yet, *Push* as Precious’s story within Sapphire’s novel pushes against this narrative, revealing the social construction of her as pathological. Moreover, she is surrounded by other women of color who encourage her to see past the dominant, medicalized narrative about herself.

Significantly, these important threads point to a history that is replete with examples of Black women who have represented disability and demanded accommodation since their earliest writings, in many ways as part of a radical tradition that defies notions of respectability. Harriet E. Wilson’s 1859 novel *Our Nig* reveals how indentured servitude in the North destroys the health of the Black body. The protagonist, Nig, makes it clear that her declined health and chronic illness as an adult is a result of the years of hard labor and physical abuse that her mistress, Mrs. B., subjected her to while growing up. Moreover, she asks that society allows her to use her writing as a means of supporting herself within the limits of her disability, a sentiment Susan Wendell expresses in *The Rejected Body* (1996).

While there is an argument to be made for locating the beginning of Black Disability Studies with narratives of servitude, such as Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig* (1859), and enslavement, such as Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1865), both of which insist on understanding their experiences in bondage and freedom in terms of their identity as Black women with acquired illnesses, there is also a robust body of Black Disability Studies writing influenced by Black women’s health activism around the Civil Right Movement of the 1950s. This moment marks a shift in Black women’s healthcare activism from the previous focus on hygiene and respectable behavior to outward critiques of social conditions and medical practices. This was especially the case for Black women’s reproductive health. For instance, Fannie Lou Hammer exposed the prevalence of the “Mississippi appendectomy” --i. e., the undisclosed sterilization of countless Black women in an attempt to control the Black population. In fact, an oft-neglected within the more mainstream parts of the movement, she emphasized healthcare rights as part

³⁶ Sapphire. *Push*, 30.

of the larger Civil Rights platform.³⁷ Hammer represents a mode of critique that exposes and rebukes a long history of medical experimentation and malpractice that debilitated Black people and the skewed power imbalances between medical practitioners and patients that, in part, enable debility in ways that Audre Lorde would echo in the 1980s. Black women activists coming of intellectual age in the 1960s and 1970s adopted and expanded this line of critique, as they participated in community-centered healthcare outreach, like the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense's free clinic that respected how Black history and culture shaped Black people's experience with disability.

Then, there is a proliferation of Black Disability thought, as Black Feminists take up disability in literary and cultural studies, as well as healthcare activism, with many Black women participating in multiple genres of writing. For instance, Toni Cade Bambara's contributions to Black Disability thought include: her activist work with local women's clinics that deemphasized medicalizing bodies and pathologizing illness; her essays, such as her critique of biomedical discourse steeped in misogynoir in her introduction to *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (1970); and her fiction that theorized mental illness and cancer as apt metaphors for the post-modern condition and as bio-psycho-socio-cultural experiences in and of themselves.³⁸

Similarly, writers like Alice Walker and Toni Morrison turned to essay and/or fiction to consider Black Disability pride in light of violent, debilitating physical and psychic injury. For example, Alice Walker chronicles her evolution from shame to self-love in her essay "Beauty: When the Other Dancer is the Self." Here, Walker relates her feelings of insecurity and anger after her eye is injured, disfigured, and eventually replaced by a glass prosthetic. Healing, for Walker, is learning to see the value and the knowledge gained from her disability. This begins for Walker when her then three-year-old daughter notices her blind eye for the first time, and, rather than say something hurtful in childlike indifference, as Walker expects, exclaims, "Mommy, there's a world in your eye...where did you get that world in your eye?" Walker claims that after that moment, "[f]or the most part, the pain left....There was a world in my eye. And I saw it was possible to love it: that in fact, for all it had

³⁷ Hammer's platform probably resonated with African Americans because a.) African Americans had long suspected birth control as part of an attempt at genocide against Black people, and b.) because motherhood was (and is) a reified position for Black women. See Harriet A. Washington, *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present*, 1st ed (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 9.

³⁸ I am referring to Toni Cade Bambara's novel *The Salt Eaters* (1980) and her short story "Going Critical" in *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions: Fictions, Essays, and Conversations By Toni Cade Bambara* (1996).

taught me of shame and anger and inner vision, I did love it.”³⁹ Healing is self-love and acceptance, not in the abstract, but experienced and expressed corporeally. She ends this essay by sharing that she had a dream about dancing and holding and kissing herself to “As”—Black-and-blind Stevie Wonder’s, inspirational hit about romantic/self-love. By the end of the essay, Walker’s drifting, rolling, floating eye is “deeply suitable to [her] personality.”⁴⁰

Black women also used fiction to exhort self-love for their disabled bodies. For instance, in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), Baby Suggs preaches a love-gospel that encourages pride in bodies ravaged by white violence and indifference. Baby Suggs tells her congregation:

Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don’t love your eyes; they’d just as soon pick ’em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face ’cause they don’t love that either...And, no, they ain’t in love with your mouth. Yonder, out there, they will see it broken and break it again....This is flesh I’m talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved.... And O my people, out yonder, hear me, they do not love your neck unnoosed and straight. So love your neck; put a hand on it, grace it, stroke it and hold it up. And all your inside parts that they’d just as soon slop for hogs, you got to love them. Saying no more, she stood up then and danced with her twisted hip...⁴¹

Michelle Jarman astutely notes that Morrison is in conversation with Hortense Spillers’s conceptualization of Black bodies rendered flesh in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.”⁴² If, as Michelle Jarman also argues, Spillers’s conceptualization of being made flesh describes an undoing of subjectivity, Morrison offers a path towards healing and restoration through accepting, and I emphasize, literally embracing the flesh.⁴³ Baby Suggs not only exhorts her congregation to develop self-love and acceptance, but she also, much like Alice Walker, guides them in expressing and demonstrating this love physically. That these women writers insist on healing through physical acts of self-love and pleasure re-envision the healing act of “laying on hands” as both a communal and individual act, which can then encompass other physical modes of healing touch, such as Walker’s

³⁹ Walker, Alice. *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose*, 370.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*, 103-104.

⁴² Jarman, Michelle. “Race and Disability,” 158.

⁴³ Jarman, 157.

and Baby Suggs's dance or in Audre Lorde's need to masturbate after her mastectomy, as she reveals in *The Cancer Journals* (1980). This concept of self-healing touch harkens to Sami Schalk's epilogue in her *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis) ability in Black Women's Speculative Fiction* (2018), where she offers pleasure as a necessary counterbalance to forces of ableism and racism that would otherwise eradicate marginalized people.

By the early 1990s, Black Feminist Studies emerged as an interdisciplinary field in the academy, where it continued to develop lines of Black Disability thought from the previous decades. In literary studies, scholars like Karla F.C. Holloway articulated the relationship between disabled bodies and literary form in her groundbreaking *Moorings & Metaphors: Figures of Culture and Gender in Black Women's Literature* (1992). Here, Holloway contends that the novel as conceptualized by white traditions works in service of normalcy, whereas Black women novelists dissemble wholeness. Valerie Lee's *Granny Midwives and Black Women Writers: Double-Dutched Readings* (1995), both an ethnography and work of literary criticism, builds on and expands on previous works that challenged Western biomedicine to insist that ideas about sickness and wellness are culturally specific. Lee argues that the changes in science and technology that mark the modern era were mobilized to delegitimize Granny midwives as health care practitioners. According to Lee, "it was the granny midwife who was most affected by changes in medicine and state regulations," and "the campaign to discredit the granny focused on more than vocational competence. The granny midwife's very body, the physical body of an elderly, black woman, was seen as unclean and deviant."⁴⁴ Lee's modes of interpreting the history of Granny midwives model Black Disability Studies methods of unpacking how ableism and stereotypes steeped in misogynoir are used to justify policies oppressive to Black women.

At the same time, Black Feminist historians and sociologists were making similar interventions in our understanding of race and disability. For example, in *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (1997), Dorothy Roberts demonstrates how racist medical science alternately construct Black women as unintelligent and irrational or rational and conniving depending on whether or not they need to justify surveilling and policing Black women's reproductive choices or blaming Black women for societal inequities. Rather than reaffirm intelligence as an appropriate barometer of social worth by distancing Black women from accusations of intellectual disability, Roberts seems to reject intelligence as problematically enmeshed in eugenics practices.⁴⁵ Roberts's arguments reveal that disability and ability are not simply static physical categories, but

⁴⁴ Lee, Valerie. *Granny Midwives and Black Women Writers: Double-Dutched Readings*, 17.

⁴⁵ Roberts, Dorothy. *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*, 63.

part of larger systems that designate bodies and minds as able/disabled depending on the circumstances.

Similarly, Evelyn M. Hammonds uncovers how ableism and misogynoir colude in discourses about Black women and HIV/AIDS to justify withholding necessary financial assistance when she writes, “I have argued elsewhere that the set of controlling images of black women with AIDs has foregrounded stereotypes of these women that have prevented them from being embraced by the public as people in need of support and care.⁴⁶ She continues, “The representation of black women’s sexuality in narratives about AIDS continues to demonstrate the disciplinary practices of the state against black women. The presence of disease is now used to justify denial of welfare benefits, treatment, and some of the basic rights of citizenship, such as privacy for black women and their children.”⁴⁷ Here, Hammonds challenges narratives that health officials and politicians (like George H.W. Bush) circulated, narratives that aligned HIV/AIDS with deviant, uncontrollable sexuality and therefore designated Black women as unworthy of a radical response under the health crisis. Hammonds not only pushes *against* the stigmatization of illness, but also pushes *for* the destigmatization of Black women’s sexual practices, whatever they may be, all the while insisting on access to quality care. Hammonds’s critical interventions and theoretical approaches to unpacking the relationship between representation, sexuality, and illness are then taken up by Cathy Cohen and other Black Queer Studies scholars, who not only continue Hammonds’s work of destigmatizing Black women’s sexual practices, but who also more explicitly address Black Queer sexualities.⁴⁸ More contemporary works of Black Disability thought expand Hammonds’s interventions by integrating ideas from Critical Disability Studies. Christopher M. Bell analyzes the discourse around HIV/AIDs and Black men’s queer sexuality in journalism about being on “the down low” in “‘Could This Happen to You?’: Stigma in Representations of the Down Low.” And, more recently, in “Tryin’ to Scrub that ‘Death Pussy’ Clean Again: The Pleasures of Domesticating HIV/AIDS in Pearl Cleage’s Fiction,” Timothy S. Lyle demonstrates how respectability politics counter stereotypes of Black women’s deviant sexuality to make characters with HIV/AIDS more palatable to readers of Pearle Cleage’s fiction.

Connecting current works of Black Disability Studies with early iterations of Black Disability thought demonstrates that Black Feminist writing developed concepts, theories, and lines of inquiry that should be understood as part of the lin-

⁴⁶ Hammonds, Evelyn M. “Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence,” 100.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ See Cathy Cohen’s *The Boundaries of Blackness: Aids and the Breakdown of Black Politics* (1999).

age of Black Disability Studies. This alternative genealogy is by no means comprehensive. It fails to capture the complexities and nuances of these movements. The works used here as examples are just shy of arbitrary: There are many key texts and figures that can and should be incorporated into this intentionally and necessarily brief historiography, which have not yet been considered. What I have done is outline a history of Black Disability Studies thought and ideas that underscores that Black Disability Studies emerged as an intellectual tradition in its own right.

Recognizing Black Feminist contributions to Disability Studies not only gives insight into possible Black histories of disability writing and activism and recovers an important archive to the field of Black Disability Studies, but it also enables us to recognize threads and linkages--if not a lineage--that situates present discourse around these ideas. Thus, I would like to conclude by way of yet another entry: Current Black Disability activism and body positive movements. Body positivity is a movement to end the stigma against and celebrate Black (super) fat bodies. Indeed, Sonya Renee Taylor's book, *This Body is Not an Apology: The Power of Radical Self Love* (2018) is what the disability discourse of previous Black feminist health activism looks like actualized. This book, in the tradition of Black feminist self-help manuals, like bell hooks's *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery* (1993), offers a path to radical self-love that explicitly examines ableist narratives that harm and hinder self-esteem and agency. For instance, she opens with Natasha, a friend and fellow slam poet, and her struggle to find sexual agency as a Black disabled woman in ways that place her in conversations with Black Disability activists such as Vilissa Thompson and Keah Brown, but the halls of academia have yet to substantially address. Moreover, Taylor insists on the body in ways that align her with Spillers's and Morrison's politics of the flesh. In Taylor's work, as well as her other contemporaries, such as educator and influencers Erica Hart and Keah Brown, the relationship between Blackness and disability is not implied, but explicitly named and examined. By gesturing towards other entry points of Black Disability critique, this article has endeavored to emphasize that writing on Blackness and disability is often contained in other locations of Black writing. This is true even today. Some of the most poignant critiques of racism, misogynoir, and ableism have emerged from Black women writing and theorizing out of their lived, embodied experiences.

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Blackened Vulnerabilities and Intersex Mobility in Jeffrey Eugenides's *Middlesex*¹

Kianna Middleton

Jeffrey Eugenides's Pulitzer Prize-winning epic novel *Middlesex*² achieved mainstream success due to its tender willingness to humanize the journey of an intersex child from the Midwestern United States. Appearing in post-9/11 popular culture, the novel's tale of perseverance and victory played well with a jarred national body. Though fictional, many readers concluded that *Middlesex* was Eugenides's autobiography. Meanwhile, his exploration of intersex, or disorders of sexual development (DSD), an "umbrella term for the myriad of characteristics of people born with sexual anatomies that various societies deem to be nonstandard,"³ offered mainstream readers new familiarity with the subject matter. Importantly, *Middlesex* was met with praise in the medical community. "Yes, it is fiction," Dr. Abraham Bergman, a pediatrician wrote of *Middlesex*, "but I cannot imagine a more authentic and sensitive voice... One way to sharpen our awareness is to listen to children's voices as they are expressed in books. In *Middlesex*, the voice is loud and clear."⁴ Additionally, Dr. Simon Fountain-Polley enthusiastically recommended the novel to parents of intersex children.⁵ Furthermore, literary critic Olivia Banner argues that the novel "helped ease the medical profession's transition from a policy of immediate surgical intervention to the acceptance of ambiguous genitalia"⁶ because of its recognizable, humanizing portrayal of intersex livability.

However powerful and clear *Middlesex* is in its representations of intersexuality, the novel is oriented toward white, able-bodied redress; therefore, other identities are characterized as sexual deficiencies and as cultural markers of stasis. Literary critics are apt to analyze *Middlesex* for its groundbreaking introduction of intersex people into the mainstream American readership, but I attest that the nov-

¹ I would like to thank the anonymous readers and *CLAJ* editors for their vital comments, Ula Y. Taylor for her critical eye and encouragement, and my mother for introducing me to *Middlesex* all those years ago.

² *Middlesex* was published in 2002.

³ David Rubin, *Intersex Matters: Biomedical Embodiment, Gender Regulation, and Transnational Activism*, 1.

⁴ Abraham Bergman, "Review of *Middlesex*, by Jeffrey Eugenides," 500.

⁵ Simon Fountain-Polley, "Review of *Middlesex*, by Jeffrey Eugenides," 952.

⁶ Olivia Banner, "'Sing now, O Muse, of the recessive mutation': Interrogating the Genetic Discourse of Sex Variation with Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex*," 843-844.

el also produces a troubling relationship between Blackness and disability. In this essay, I scrutinize Cal's childhood years as "Callie" in the 1960s, betwixt the steady decline of Detroit's industrial stronghold and the changing racial dynamics in the "Motor City" that culminate in the Detroit uprising of 1967. Adult Cal reflects on scenes from his childhood when he interacted with Black characters, before his subsequent teen years carried him away from Detroit, MI. Fundamentally, I argue that *Middlesex* analogizes both disability and Blackness so that Cal is able to follow his able-bodied destiny beyond sedimented and blackened identities and spaces more neatly.

The novel depicts the Stephanides, a Greek immigrant family with a history of incestuous relationships. Having fled from Turkey during the Greco-Turkey War, siblings Desdemona and Lefty immigrate to Detroit, Michigan in the 1920s and recast themselves as a married couple. The narrator, Cal Stephanides, formerly "Calliope" or "Callie" for short, is Desdemona and Lefty's grandchild. As an omniscient truth-teller, Cal traces his intersexuality to their consanguineous union and his inheritance of the Stephanides's tainted genes. Cal attributes the stigmatized character trait (the Stephanides's gene) to other sexually non-normative family members, including his parents, Milton and Tessie, who are also biological cousins. After a trip to the emergency room during his teenage years, Cal learns about his intersex diagnosis, 5-alpha-reductase deficiency (5-ARD); shortly thereafter, he decides to live as a man. The novel chronicles his medicalization through a discussion of encounters with Dr. Luce, the fictionalized characterization of Dr. John Money, who was the "principal architect of the dominant medical paradigm of intersex management."⁷

This essay offers a close reading of *Middlesex*, rooted in the representations of mobility, Blackness, and disability in a novel widely regarded for its intersex narrative. Like Black feminist disability scholar Sami Schalk, I also "read for the metaphoric and material meanings of (dis)ability as well as its intersectional relationship to other vectors of power which may be deployed in opposition to or conjunction with it."⁸ As part of a continued effort to challenge African American Studies and Disability Studies' difficult incorporation of each other and to offer *Middlesex* as a novel of importance in our interdisciplinary fields, my purpose is to destabilize common readings of *Middlesex*. Furthermore, I apply disability theory to the history of intersex medicalization, not to claim intersex as a disability, but to argue for their mutual historical emergence and their "coalitional potentialities."⁹

⁷ Rubin, 16.

⁸ Sami Schalk, *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction*, 25-26.

⁹ Hilarly Malatino qtd in Robert McRuer, "The Future of Critical Intersex," 250.

My method is twofold. On the one hand, I investigate Eugenides's production of normativity, disability, and race by utilizing disability as a "mode of analysis" that is dedicated to examining the "social norms that define particular attributes as impairments as well as the social conditions that concentrate stigmatized attributes in particular populations"¹⁰ that Julie Avril Minich theorizes. On the other hand, I argue that, though fiction, *Middlesex* circulates representations of race, sexuality, and biology that are authenticated by medical professionals—like Drs. Bergman and Fountain-Polley above—and Eugenides's lay readership. Therefore, I attend to *Middlesex* as a literary text that creates its own resonate intersex history, but also unknowingly cements anti-Black and ableist stereotypes. I call attention to these parallel narratives in *Middlesex* by showcasing the utility of interdisciplinary Black Disability methodologies for literary criticism.

Part One: *Middlesex* Cleans House

Middlesex's wide public appeal is a result of its digestible, "inoffensive,"¹¹ and inspiring premise: mobility. Cal, who narrates his conception story through his parents, shares that he "can only explain the scientific mania that overtook [his] father during that spring of '59 as a symptom of the belief in progress that was infecting everyone back then...In that optimistic, postwar America, which [Cal] caught the tail end of, everybody was the master of his own destiny, so it only followed that my father would try to be the master of his."¹² Destiny and self-reliance are the crux of Eugenides's representations of ability because *Middlesex*'s protagonist is defined by his transcendence of biological and ethnic shortcomings, while Black characters are destined to positions within the lower social stratum. Eugenides's narrativization embodies what disability scholar Lennard J. Davis theorizes is at the core of most creative writing: the preoccupation with normalcy and identification with normative characters over "the Other."¹³ Davis opines, "One can find in almost any novel...a kind of surveying of the terrain of the body, an attention to difference—physical, mental, and national."¹⁴ The surveying of terrain in *Middlesex* extends from Detroit's landscape to the physical bodies of intersex people, the assimilation of white ethnic immigrants into the United States, and to urban Black Detroiters. By implicitly declaiming his white able-bodied heteromascularity, the narrator stands apart from physical, mental, and national differences.

¹⁰ Julie Avril Minich, "Enabling Whom? Critical Disability Studies Now."

¹¹ Merton Lee, "Why Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex* is so Inoffensive," 39.

¹² Jeffrey Eugenides, *Middlesex*, 9-10.

¹³ Lennard J. Davis, "Introduction: Normality, Power, and Culture," 9.

¹⁴ Davis, 12.

Moreover, Eugenides alerts readers to the novel's philosophy by cohering the Stephanides's "belief in progress"¹⁵ to Cal's bildungsroman. As an adult, Cal performs masculinity by informing readers that "[a]fter what I've been through, some overcompensation is to be expected."¹⁶ At the heart of *Middlesex*, Cal is a master of his body, and an able-bodied progress narrative emerges from his physical and geographic transitions. So, throughout this essay, I use the metaphor of mobility to draw attention to the normativity and latent ableism and racism at play in the novel. I contend that *Middlesex* exclusively grants non-ambiguous, able-bodied white masculine subjects the privilege of movement, since Cal abandons everywhere and everyone—even his former self—for a new destiny. In other words, intersex and disability metaphor in *Middlesex* fit within literary scholar Ato Quayson's "typology of disability representation," which accounts for the fact that "literary representations of disability are not merely reflecting disability; they are refractions of that reality, with varying emphases of both an aesthetic and ethical kind."¹⁷ The novel's lure of a cohesive sex and gender, race, and ability discourse is a response to Quayson's naming of the "crisis in the protocols of representation" that lead to unease with the "temporary nature of able-bodiedness" to which the disabled body gives rise.¹⁸ Cal engrains this temporariness when he informs readers that his grandmother's Greek tradition of correctly predicting the sex of the family's babies "receded one more notch. [Cal's] arrival marked the end of her baby-guessing and the start of her husband's long decline."¹⁹ Cal's birth symbolizes the diminishment of ethnic whiteness from the managed, white Americanness Cal is destined to embody, while his birth also portrays disability as "the interface with otherness"²⁰ that peripheralizes disability and racialization in favor of able-bodiedness.

Therefore, I find that Sarah Graham's argument, that "*Middlesex* offers its readers the same opportunity to view the 'Other' from a safe distance and find reassurance,"²¹ is of importance to the study of disability and Otherness in the novel. Eugenides begins the novel by revealing Cal's intersexuality. However, to bolster Cal's normativity and familiarity, the author subsequently lists Cal's accomplishments.²² The list includes Cal's gender appropriate and able-bodied athletic pro-

¹⁵ Eugenides, *Middlesex*, 9.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁷ Ato Quayson, *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation*, 36.

¹⁸ Quayson, 14.

¹⁹ Eugenides, *Middlesex*, 17-18.

²⁰ Quayson, 39-40.

²¹ Sarah Graham, "See synonyms at MONSTER': En-Freaking Transgender in Jeffrey Eugenides's *Middlesex*," 16.

²² Eugenides, *Middlesex*, 3.

ess, which he demonstrates by playing the position of a field hockey goalie in his youth, and his civically responsible career with the U.S. State Department, which both solidify his reassuring identity. In response to Cal's normativity in the novel, intersex activist and scholar Morgan Holmes posits that the narrative strategy "operates to effect the erasure of all such [non-normative] crises, and to secure the place of male heterosexuality and patriarchal power."²³ Eugenides secures such powers for Cal by discussing medicalization along the same lines as most intersex specialists. Intersex researcher and psychologist Suzanne Kessler writes, "physicians do not consider [intersex] natural. Instead they think of, and speak of, the surgical/hormonal alternation of such deformities as natural because such intervention returns the body to what it 'ought to have been' if events had taken their typical course."²⁴ The novel's persistent referral to the Stephanides's unnatural bloodline and intersexuality as both a "mutation hiding out"²⁵ and a mythic villain helps to establish an adversarial relationship to biology and disability. Hence, Cal's restored able-bodied heteromascularity,²⁶ by way of his gender transition in his teen years, expresses and secures what "ought to have been" within a matrix of other "ought-haves,"²⁷ including white Americanness.

Indeed, Eugenides explains in an interview with *Oprah's Book Club* that Cal's repaired mobility is an attribute. He reasons, "Cal's transformation makes him suited, intellectually and emotionally, to tell these other tales of metamorphosis, be they national, racial, or historical."²⁸ Presumably, Cal's sensitivity makes him a careful storyteller; however, his transformation is only possible because of the removal of disruptive characters and environments that threaten such normative metamorphoses. For example, as "Callie," Cal's queer girlhood (which I discuss in the following section) fulfills a notion of fluid hybridity that does not align with the vein of biological essentialism that is at the heart of *Middlesex*; therefore, Callie is regarded as a childhood disability. Critic Debra Shostak argues, "Since genetics provides the point of contact between the novel of immigration and the novel of intersexuality, genetics also governs the linear logic of narrative causality...."²⁹ Hence, the slippages between Lefty and Desdemona's incest and Cal's intersex

²³ Morgan Holmes, "Cal/liope in Love: The 'Prescientific' Desires of an Apolitical 'Hermaphrodite,'" 224.

²⁴ Suzanne Kessler, "The Medical Construction of Gender: Case Management of Intersexed Infants," 24.

²⁵ Eugenides, *Middlesex*, 81.

²⁶ For more on able-bodied heterosexuality, see *Crip Theory* 6-10.

²⁷ Kessler, 24.

²⁸ Eugenides, "Q&A with Jeffrey Eugenides," Oprah.com, 05 June 2007, Accessed 16 Feb 2018.

²⁹ Debra Shostak, "'Theory Uncompromised by Practicality': Hybridity in Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex*," 389.

birth, between Lefty's strokes and Callie's queer girlhood, and between Black communities and Detroit's infrastructural decay, all reinforce the novel's deterministic pulse.

Remarkably, against the logic of the novel itself, Cal represents the sole character who is recovered from "the position of the strange."³⁰ For instance, after a date with a woman, the "adult Cal" contemplates his own strange beauty. He claims, "As a baby, even as a little girl, I possessed an awkward, extravagant beauty. No single feature was right in itself and yet, when they were taken all together, something captivating emerged. An inadvertent harmony. A changeableness, too, as if beneath my visible face there was another, having second thoughts."³¹ Cal gestures towards his misgendering at birth and his congenital changeableness, or the hybrid body that comes to rest during his white, able-bodied adulthood. However, Black characters are not uplifted from "the position of the strange,"³² nor are impaired bodies recoverable or fluid. Cal explains this positioning when he expresses to readers, "you are put on close relations with entropy" if you grow up in Detroit.³³ Black Detroiters are first narrated by Cal as lively and optimistic about the possibilities of life in the North during the 1920s. Black foundry workers at Ford Motor Company are described as having statuesque bodies, "goggled against the infernal light and heat" of the furnace³⁴ during a scene that gives way to subsequent descriptions of McPherson Hall in 1932, which is named in *Middlesex* as the Nation of Islam's temporary home.³⁵ With its "ornamental touches," "Roman urns spilling granite fruit," and "the harlequin marble," McPherson Hall represents an image of Black prosperity that is short-lived in the city.³⁶ Later still in the novel, during the late 1960s, young Black girls are sex-trafficked outside of the Stephanides's restaurant, and perhaps we are to read the girls as the children and grandchildren of the aforementioned foundry workers and of the faithful. The novel includes the girls' pre-uprising wishes "of singing backup or opening up a hair shop"³⁷ and the roaring laughter and play from Black people during the days and nights of July 1967 that to Cal "looked more like a block party than it did a riot."³⁸

³⁰ Shostak, 391.

³¹ Eugenides, *Middlesex*, 218.

³² Shostak, 391.

³³ Eugenides, *Middlesex*, 517.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 96.

³⁵ Critics discuss the presence of the Nation of Islam in the novel, Hsu 96-97; Lee 36-38.

³⁶ Eugenides, *Middlesex*, 143.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 237.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 240.

Yet, *Middlesex* counters Black Detroiters' hope with the realities of systemic racism and premature death that persists for decades. Cal mentions that “[w]hat [his grandparents] didn’t see [when they arrived in the 1920s] were the workers sleeping on the streets because of the housing shortage, and the ghetto just to the east...teeming with the city’s African Americans, who weren’t allowed to live anywhere else. They didn’t see, in short, the seeds of the city’s destruction....”³⁹ By insinuating that destruction has been implanted by design into the community, the novel foreshadows moments that witness the placement of restraints on Black mobility. Ironically, Cal sees himself as a ‘seed of destruction’ because of the negative consequences he attributes to the Stephanides’s gene, but he is not entrapped by Detroit’s downward spiral. Scenes of Black death also curb the dreams, laughter, and play of Black characters. During the middle of the uprising, Morrison, an older Black patron of the Stephanides’s neighborhood diner, slips out of his home to purchase a box of cigarettes from Cal’s father. A few nights later, the National Guard kills Morrison. The flick of Morrison’s lighter alerts the patrolling tanks of his presence and a soldier discharges a lethal shot into his home.⁴⁰ Consequently, the true health hazard and source of Morrison’s untimely death is the military’s force and not cigarette smoking.

Further, Morrison’s death—the termination of his Black movement—eerily alludes to the novel’s opening pages wherein Cal stations himself as a part of the procession of military vehicles. He muses: “An army tank led me into urban battle once...I’ve left my body in order to occupy others....”⁴¹ Cal’s transition out of Detroit and out of his misgendered body follows a series of preordained steps that crystalize during the uprising. Cal, who claims that he “tried to forget [his misgendered] body by keeping it in motion,”⁴² is able to describe Morrison’s death and the other the violent occurrences because he has the privilege of mobility, as he stealthily rides his bicycle through downtown. Morrison’s boldness and unfitness, which diverge from Cal’s fitness and swiftness, is indicative of the “crippling” impact of race that Moya Bailey and Izetta A. Mobley argue frame “Black people as ineligible or unsound for citizenship.”⁴³ On the other hand, Cal is worthy of citizenship because he reverses his ethnic and sexual markers of ineligibility and biological destruction.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 248.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 320.

⁴³ Moya Bailey and Izetta A. Mobley, “Work in the Intersections: A Black Feminist Disability Framework,” 25.

Eugenides's metaphors of mobility and immobility also overlay his discussion of biology, genetics, and bodily truthiness. Disability scholar and activist Ellen Samuels argues that this desire for bodies-as-truth is part of what she terms "fantasies of identification" that emerged during the mid-nineteenth century in response to the "crisis of representation" that racial ambiguity, gender, and disability identification posed in the United States.⁴⁴ Samuels posits that "fantastical solutions" were developed to classify others through the "biological mark of identity."⁴⁵ And that "[a]t the core of the fantasy of identification lies the assumption that embodied social identities such as race, gender, and disability are fixed, legible, and categorizable."⁴⁶ Eugenides falls for the fantasy in *Middlesex*, replaying race and gender science's outdated conclusions about the body in order to continue a narrative of body-as-essentialized vessel that contains undeniable truths.⁴⁷

As a result, Eugenides's fixed and legible representations serve to "[falsify] reality in order to preserve a culturally constructed 'truth' of sex."⁴⁸ In particular, the novel analogizes incest and intersex, leading many readers to believe that taboo sexual behavior is the root of intersex genetic development.⁴⁹ Eugenides writes in the chapter entitled "Flesh and Blood" that the mutated Stephanides's gene followed the consanguineous family out of Asia Minor and waited for "a clarinet to play seductively out a back window."⁵⁰ Subsequently, this led cousins to marry, which led, finally to Cal's intersex birth. But, at the novel's close, Cal reaches an ascended position of white, able-bodied, heteromascularity, which metaphorically revises the family's genetic inheritance of bad genes to good genes. The novel's flawed logic is not lost on readers, notably Eugenides's troubling connection between incest and intersex, which has no factual basis and actually led to an uncomfortable real-world conversation on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* in 2007. An audience member who self-identified as intersex pressed the author on his false link between intersex and incest in the novel, and Eugenides rationalized, "I never wanted people to think that Callie's condition is a result of any kind of behavior, you know, or any kind of crime. That's not what I wanted but because I had to do it, as I

⁴⁴ Ellen Samuels, *Fantasies of Identification: Disability, Gender, Race*, 1.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴⁷ For more on the body as truth in science and medicine, see Carroll 193; Repo 240; Samuels 17, 197; Guidotto 49.

⁴⁸ Rachel Carroll, "Retrospective Sex: Rewriting Intersexuality in Jeffrey Eugenides's *Middlesex*," 193.

⁴⁹ Sarah Graham provides an in-depth reading of incest in Greek mythology, 5-6.

⁵⁰ Eugenides, *Middlesex*, 361.

said, in a quick way, I had to resort to incest.”⁵¹ This interaction, which included the audience member’s troubled expression and seeming dissatisfaction with Eugenides’s answer, reflects this novel’s perpetuation of untruths beyond its bindings. Eugenides’s supposed need for a quick transition fuses the cultural (incest) to the biological (intersex), which opens the novel up to deterministic conclusions about race as well as disability.

Specifically, Eugenides utilizes whiteness and its privileges as a vehicle to entrench hegemonic norms. In the novel, white privilege is represented through the power of individual self-fashioning and Cal’s geographic mobility, both of which are privileges of whiteness. For instance, upon notification of his father’s death later in the novel, Cal returns to Detroit, whereupon his privilege allows him to shift past the static nonwhiteness present in the city. As a passenger in his brother’s car, Cal describes a Black Detroiter he observes out on the city street. He notes the man’s “exotic” style is different from his suburban-bred aesthetic, but he enthuses, “I was glad to see him anyway. I couldn’t take my eyes away.”⁵² As their car drives off, readers are supposed to identify with Cal’s positionality and ignore Detroit’s turbulence. However, the fact that the city neither revitalized nor does it “mock [his] grief by being sparkling or winsome,”⁵³ validates the entropy metaphor from which Cal is released due to his mobility.

The Death(s) of Queer Girlhood

Stephanie Hsu proposes that ethnicity—particularly Cal’s “renunciation of [his] ethnic girlhood”—is the medium “for exploring, domesticating, and ultimately naturalizing taboo forms of sexuality and gender in nonnormative bodies in *Middlesex*.”⁵⁴ Moreover, Cal’s renunciation(s) communicate to readers that disability and nonwhiteness are visible differences that ought to be discarded for the sake of normative futurity. Thus, the end of Cal’s queer girlhood, which occurs after he receives his diagnosis, and the grand removal of Callie to a “vestigial memory”⁵⁵ is representative of what Samuel Cohen argues is a “foreclosure [of] the meaning of the ambiguity of Cal’s body.”⁵⁶ Pointedly, Cal’s queer girlhood is a

⁵¹ Eugenides, “Exclusive Q&A with Jeffrey Eugenides,” Oprah.com, 01 June 2008, Accessed 16 Feb 2018, <https://www.oprah.com/oprahsbookclub/exclusive-qa-with-jeffrey-eugenides>.

⁵² Eugenides, *Middlesex*, 518.

⁵³ Eugenides, *Middlesex*, 517.

⁵⁴ Stephanie Hsu, “Ethnicity and the Biopolitics of Intersex in Jeffrey Eugenides’s ‘Middlesex,’” 97.

⁵⁵ Holmes, 227.

⁵⁶ Samuel Cohen, “The Novel in a Time of Terror: ‘Middlesex,’ History, and Contemporary American Fiction,” 387.

myopic holding place between the awkward neutrality of adolescence and a capable, heteronormative male adulthood.

The novel's evolutionary chains and near-death and death depictions mold Callie into Cal. Namely, the allegory appears when the father of Callie's childhood friend, Clementine Stark, suffers a heart attack, presumably triggered by her and Callie's queer contact.⁵⁷ Additionally, Lefty suffers a series of strokes that coincide with Callie's disruptive appearance(s) in the novel. Lefty's first stroke occurs at Callie's birth, suggesting that Cal's queer cry is what silences Lefty.⁵⁸ Lefty's second stroke occurs after Callie and Clementine playfully kiss in the Stephanides's pool. Motionlessly situated in a pool chair, Lefty stares blankly at the children as they emerge from underwater.⁵⁹ Callie, therefore, is representative of an "unlivable"⁶⁰ and deadly subjectivity, or, to modify Jack Halberstam's characterization of the butch lesbian, "a block to [adult] heteronormative male desire"⁶¹ and, in this case, Cal's adult desires.

Furthermore, Callie is a significant obstacle in Eugenides's maneuvering of whiteness. Callie's androgyny and proximity to lesbianism detracts from the normative imperatives upon which the novel stakes identity formation. Callie's complexities block Cal's advancement from his bad gene pool and from Detroit and the systemic racism Black people face. Hence Callie's disappearance helps to maintain the novel's clear demarcation between Otherness and normalcy.⁶² For example, Cal disappears Callie through his delineation of his adult self when he explains, "I'm not androgynous in the least...In other words, I operate in society as a man....I've lived more than half my life as a male, and by now everything comes naturally. When Calliope surfaces, she does so like a childhood speech impediment."⁶³ Thus, Callie is a queer echo, the unspeakable or misspoken precursor to Cal.⁶⁴ Her mere comportment is an impediment, and not only is Callie an image of an incomplete, unfinished, or mislabeled body, but she is also the definition of impairment for Cal, because she is an unwanted block to his white male mobility.

Furthermore, in the above passage, Cal's masculine operation in society is naturalized as if he retains a gendered muscle memory or somatic knowing that Callie interrupts. Through losing Callie's unsayable identity for Cal's sayable cisgender

⁵⁷ Eugenides, *Middlesex*, 267.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 266-267.

⁶⁰ Judith Butler qtd in Graham, 16.

⁶¹ Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 95.

⁶² Lennard J. Davis further theorizes the norm and Otherness in literature, 9-12.

⁶³ Eugenides, *Middlesex*, 41.

⁶⁴ Graham, 5.

heterosexual existence, Eugenides flattens all other possibilities for complex identification and agency. The Greek name Calliope is replaced with the terse Cal,⁶⁵ as his transition from Callie denotes his movement from ethnic Other to unmarked and “racially indeterminate.”⁶⁶ Cal also removes his Greek grandfather from his masculine identification by explaining that “As I cried my first cry, Lefty was silenced; and as he gradually lost the ability to see, to taste, to hear, to think or even remember, I began to see, taste, and remember everything, even stuff I hadn’t seen, eaten, or done.”⁶⁷ Cal is imbued with the power to undo the Stephanides’s non-whiteness through his identification with white masculinity. Moreover, Cal’s birth and gender transition are events that silence the family’s disabled past, as Lefty’s ailments enable Cal’s able-bodied present and future.

Queer (E)Motions: Whiteness, the City, and Suburbia

Middlesex’s first chapters document the elder Stephanides’s assimilation experiences in Detroit, MI. During a home visit from Lefty’s employer, The Ford Motor Company, managers instruct the family to rid their home of Greek foods and smells and are asked to demonstrate their hygiene practices as proof of their Americanization.⁶⁸ Lefty mimics tooth brushing and the manager directs him to complete the task by scrubbing in small circles across his teeth and gums. In “Tidy Whiteness: A Genealogy of Race, Purity and Hygiene,” Dana Berthold contends, “[W]hiteness is not just an identity that gets ascribed to particular bodies. It is a practice, and as such, it must be reproduced in little ways every day—like through our practices of extreme hygiene.”⁶⁹ Lefty’s hygienic act is a dual disciplinary performance: first through the repetition of whitening, from Greek to “indeterminate,”⁷⁰ and second, through the removal of filth from the body, primarily the mouth, the source of sexual excess in this scene.

Likewise, the mouth and speech are contested arenas for racial and sexual identification, as reflected in a scene between Marius, a Black law student, and Callie, wherein they discuss the Stephanides’s racism. Marius and Callie’s discussion leads to Milton, Cal’s father, demanding that Callie “get over here” and that Marius “stay away from her, you hear me?”⁷¹ Milton’s “practices of extreme hygiene”

⁶⁵ For more on the metaphor of Cal’s shortened name, see Banner 845; Cohen 377; Shostak 404, 409.

⁶⁶ Hsu, 67.

⁶⁷ Eugenides, *Middlesex*, 269.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁶⁹ Berthold, 14-15.

⁷⁰ Hsu, 97.

⁷¹ Eugenides, *Middlesex*, 231.

reorients Callie and Marius. Callie is told to maintain her distance from Marius (“get over here”) and Marius is commanded to remove himself from his proximity to Callie (“stay away from her”). Marius and Callie are silenced and disciplined, which provides readers with yet another lesson in social norms and the dangers of integration.

Furthermore, the Stephanides’s assimilation shifts uncleanliness from their bodies to other bodies because the Stephanides initially represent racialized and sexualized connotations of “dirty people,” both “physical [and] moral,”⁷² as they are consanguineous Greek immigrants. Fittingly, Eugenides appends the metaphor of dirtiness to “Black Bottom,” a Black neighborhood in the city. In one scene, Cal’s grandmother, Desdemona, whose work skills and Greek identity serve to limit her opportunities, is forced to seek employment outside of her ethnic comfort zone. As she disgustedly walks the streets of Black Bottom in the 1930s, in her mind she castigates the Black residents: “Front porches were full of living room furniture, old couches and armchairs, people playing checkers, arguing, waving fingers, and breaking into laughter. *Always laughing, these mavros. Laughing, laughing, as though everything is funny. What is so funny, tell me?*”⁷³ Firstly, Desdemona’s verbalization of moral high ground over other dirty people in another dirty location is a narrative course corrective. The “always” laughter of Black Detroiters becomes the echoing background to the Stephanides’s racial, sexual, and economic mastery.

Secondly, Desdemona’s visual critique mimics sociological assessments of Black communities and confirms Black social disordering. This disordering appears in the novel as transcorporeal excess and melds Black inhabitants to the city environment itself.⁷⁴ In reality, the number of Black residents in the city almost doubled from the 1950s onward,⁷⁵ making metaphors of social disorder and excess a material reality.⁷⁶ Regarding social disorder, historian Thomas Sugrue also chronicles the city’s postwar racial politics, and he elicits the language of Black debilitation and decomposition. He surmises, “blackness and whiteness assumed a spatial definition... [t]o the majority of untutored white observers, visible poverty, overcrowding, and deteriorating houses were signs of individual moral deficien-

⁷² Berthold, 10.

⁷³ Eugenides, *Middlesex*, 142, emphasis his.

⁷⁴ Furthermore, Dennis Tyler argues that spatial segregation was a tool of “racial injury” in the Jim Crow era (Tyler 188).

⁷⁵ Kristin Kasinsky, “Detroit: Built for the Road Ahead?”, 162.

⁷⁶ The exact figures were 28.9% in 1960 to 75.7% in 1990 (Sugrue 162). Child Hill puts these changing demographics another way, “Between 1950 and 1970, Detroit lost two out of every three whites between the ages of twenty-five and forty-four” (Child Hill 10).

cies, not manifestations of structural inequalities.”⁷⁷ In *Middlesex*, this is apparent when Cal’s father appears to make moral pronouncements to the family about Black communities, stating, “[Black people] don’t take care of their properties. They let everything go to hell.”⁷⁸ In short, Desdemona’s “always,” Milton’s “everything,” and Cal’s inability to “take his eyes off” of Black inadequacies and strangeness harden the metaphors that exemplify Blackness and/as disability.

Yet, the Stephanides perceive themselves as superior to Black Detroiters, but, as a white ethnic person, Desdemona’s navigation of and employment in Black Bottom demonstrates the reality of their close proximity to Blackness. The Stephanides’s perpetual desire to escape disorder—the shame of incest and the Blackness of Detroit—is epitomized through white flight and the urge to start anew. This is clear when Cal recalls the warnings from his parent’s home search and states, “Realtors only mentioned ‘community standards’ and selling to ‘the right sort of people.’ . . . You didn’t want what was happening in Detroit to happen out here.”⁷⁹ The Stephanides’s relocation, which gestures to the metaphorical transformation into their being the right sort of people with standards, propels Cal’s identity development. Essentially, the family’s new suburban home on Middlesex Boulevard, like Cal’s fluid body, is a doorway between Cal’s debilitated queer childhood and his “reassuring”⁸⁰ normativity in the present.

Significantly, the fresh start for Cal and the family’s move from the city to “out here”⁸¹ parallels U.S. intersex protocols from the 1960s. Medical professionals warned parents about the social risk of having their neighborhood know about their unmanaged intersex child.⁸² Parents were told to keep the diagnosis a secret and, occasionally, were “even advised to move to another town when a child’s gender is reassigned, so that no one [would] know of any alterations.”⁸³ Thus, the exposure of intersex, within and outside of the novel, motions a foreclosure of white inclusion and renders unmanaged and/or discovered intersex persons as ethnic and sexual outsiders. Put simply, in *Middlesex*, the suburbs may be a retreat from queer intimacies and bodies that are rampant in the city; meanwhile, ambiguous, fraudulent bodies, like Callie’s, disrupt and trespass upon the cleanliness of suburban space.

⁷⁷ Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*, 9.

⁷⁸ Eugenides, *Middlesex*, 230.

⁷⁹ Eugenides, *Middlesex*, 256.

⁸⁰ Graham, 16.

⁸¹ Eugenides, *Middlesex*, 256.

⁸² Sharon Hill, “At the Crossroads: The Political Economy of Postwar Detroit,” 814.

⁸³ Abby Wilkerson, “Normate Sex and its Discontents,” 189.

Part Two: For A Better Chair to Stand On: Disability and Blackness

Bailey and Mobley emphasize that the interrelatedness of Blackness and disability is such that Blackness works as a cultural marker of disability, while disability “blackens” those society considers to be unfit.⁸⁴ In conversation with their assessment, I argue that characterizations of Black masculinity amidst the Detroit uprising in *Middlesex* affix Blackness, disability, and land to cultural metaphors of strength and immobilization. For instance, Marius, an asthmatic, stands on a box outside of the Stephanides’s restaurant, sermonizing about white supremacy, police brutality, and the connections between Black and ethnic white communities. Marius’s asthmatic body and the use of a metaphorical prosthesis via his chair soapbox convey the laborious and chronic history of Black political struggle for space and resources.⁸⁵ Moreover, his deficient lung capacity is a historical “marker of difference” that dates back to the mid-1860s and has served as evidence of Black people’s unfitness for life beyond enslavement.⁸⁶ Yet, Marius delivers a strong message about race in his impaired body, which attests to “the curious task of being simultaneously hyper-abled-bodied and disabled, while at the same time being locked into ideologies that figure us as both superhumanly strong and pathologically inept,”⁸⁷ as Bailey and Mobley argue. The Black doubling that Bailey and Mobley theorize is what enables Milton’s fear of Marius and Callie’s relationship and Marius’s physical unfitness to occupy compatible narrative space.⁸⁸

Marius ultimately embodies a crippled or “crippled”⁸⁹ form of heteromascularity, contrary to Cal’s ever-burgeoning and able-bodied white masculinity.⁹⁰ Shortly before the uprising, Callie, a second grader at the time, and Marius meet at Milton’s restaurant (in the city). During a lengthy dialogue between the two, Marius’s masculinity is on full display:

⁸⁴ Bailey and Mobley, 24.

⁸⁵ For more readings of Blackness, asthma and disability, and racism, see Braun 27-54 and Shaw 172-173.

⁸⁶ Lundy Braun qtd in Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, 111.

⁸⁷ Bailey and Mobley, 24.

⁸⁸ Jess Waggoner details black unfitness and performances of citizenship, 89-91.

⁸⁹ Bailey and Mobley, 25.

⁹⁰ For more on how disability cripps or makes “questionable” Black masculinity, see Pickens 2-3.

“Why don’t you get a better chair to stand on [Marius]?”

“You don’t like my chair?”

“It’s all broken.”

“This chair is an antique. That means it’s supposed to be broke.”

“Not that broken.”

[...]

And suddenly my father was shouting my name. “Callie!”

“What?”

“Get over here right now!”

Marius stood up awkwardly from his chair. “We were just talking,” he said. “Smart little girl you got here.”

“You stay away from her, you hear me?”

[...]

For the rest of that day Milton kept after me. “You are never, ever, to talk to strangers like that. What’s the matter with you?”

“He’s not a stranger. His name is Marius Wyzzewixard Challouehliczilczese Grimes.”⁹¹

Marius’s attachment to the broken chair baffles Callie; however, the broken chair assists Marius’s voice and is a critical tool of his resistance. Surrounding Marius in broken objects that match his asthmatic body suggests a limit to his power or mobility, while it concurrently represents an assimilable or even threatening Blackness via Marius’s number three rank in law school.⁹² That said, Marius’s intelligence never overrides his presumed biological inferiority and immovability. Through this narrative maneuver, Eugenides generates what Disability scholars David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder theorize as “narrative prosthesis,” which is what they find to be the historical overuse of disability as a narrative device that signifies unruliness and irrationality.⁹³ They contend that, though disability is undoubtedly everywhere in literature, it “rarely take[s] up disability as an experience of social or political dimensions.”⁹⁴ *Middlesex* imparts disability as prosthetic through the metaphors of physical, class, and racial mobility, and reflects the social and political dimensions of (a) blackened and disabled experience.

As a result, disability cannot be untangled from Blackness in *Middlesex*, and both Blackness and disability are examples of what Mitchell and Snyder assert is

⁹¹ Eugenides, *Middlesex*, 230-231.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 229-230.

⁹³ David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, “Narrative Prosthesis,” 223-225.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 222.

“an encounter with that which is believed to be [i.e., disability] off the map of ‘recognizable’ human experiences.”⁹⁵ Marius’s broken chair, body, and English—by way of his eccentric name—are utterly unpalatable to white characters.⁹⁶ Despite Marius’s frequent arrivals at the Stephanides’s restaurant, Milton sees Marius as a “stranger,”⁹⁷ meaning that his name and message are incomprehensible to Milton’s ears and eyes. However, Callie’s familiarity to Marius occurs because of Callie’s own unintelligibility. And since Callie is, after all, the manifestation of Cal’s speech impediment, we are prompted to empathize with Marius in the above scene because we empathize with Callie’s strangeness and vulnerability.

Although, we are not to empathize with Marius’s masculinity in the same manner that we uphold Cal’s masculinity. In an early morning scene during the Detroit uprising, Cal begins to formulate his own white masculine, able-bodied subjectivity in response to Black revolt and his father’s metaphorical emasculation.⁹⁸ On July 25, 1967, Callie wakes at 6:23 a.m. to a ringing pink phone. Cal indicates that he “put down the pink phone [and] walked into my parents’ bedroom,”⁹⁹ directly setting aside his femininity via the pink phone for a confrontation with masculinity. As Callie alerts Milton to the impending threat to their family’s restaurant in the city, Cal recalls, “My father jumped out of bed...flipped gymnastically into the air and landed on his feet, completely unaware of both his nakedness and his dream-filled morning erection. (So it was that the Detroit riots will always be connected in my mind with my first sight of the aroused male genitalia).”¹⁰⁰ The scene doubles as a threat to both Milton and Cal’s nakedness. Cal’s dysphoria and Milton’s fear of private property damage, pun intended, is incited by the violent cry from Black Detroiters encroaching on the family restaurant.

In Cal’s mind, a battle of the masculinities ensues between the image of Black manhood asserting itself across the city of Detroit and the gender identity Cal wants to embody. However, in order for Cal’s masculinity to develop, Black protest and corporeal vulnerability must be lost in the larger narrative of white male redress. Through Mitchell and Snyder’s argument that narrative prosthesis works by “removing the unsightly from view,”¹⁰¹ Black masculinity becomes a prosthetic

⁹⁵ Mitchell and Snyder, “Introduction: Disability as Narrative Supplement,” 5.

⁹⁶ Eugenides writes that Marius’s parents name him after Ethiopian Nationalist, Wyzzewizard S.E. Challouehliczilczese (*Middlesex* 229).

⁹⁷ Eugenides, *Middlesex*, 231.

⁹⁸ This coupling, of course, is deeply imbedded and oversimplified within colonialism’s violent sexual discourse (Mercer 134; Ross 307).

⁹⁹ Eugenides, *Middlesex*, 238.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Mitchell and Snyder, “Disability as Narrative Supplement,” 8.

that signifies an unruly body with explosive, disruptive power that is supplanted by the desire for white manhood. Cal's memory of the uprising is overwritten and removed by the pain associated with his misgendering. During the uprising, Black masculinity is also replaced when Marius confronts the Stephanides. The outcome of the incident appears to benefit the Stephanides, as reflected in the following passage, where Cal recalls leaving his home for the family restaurant. He describes seeing Marius, through fire and smoke, in front of the restaurant:

I see him lift a bottle in his hand. He lights the rag hanging from the bottle's mouth and with a not terribly good arm flings the Molotov cocktail through the front window of the Zebra Room. And as flames erupt within the diner, the arsonist shouts in an ecstatic voice:

“*Opa*, motherfucker!”

I saw him only from the back. It was not yet fully light. Smoke rose from the adjacent burning buildings. Still, in the firelight, I thought I recognized the black beret of my friend Marius Wyzzewixard Challouehliczilczese Grimes before the figure ran off.¹⁰²

Cal cites the figure's “not terribly good arm,” which informs us that it is Marius because of the emphasis and call back to bodily impairment. Consequently, Marius's destruction of the Stephanides's business gives the family economic mobility and a rehabilitated image.¹⁰³ Aware of the perverse underside of the uprising, Cal confesses: “Shameful as it is to say, the riots were the best thing that ever happened to us.”¹⁰⁴ Therefore, the uprising serves as a definitive moment of interracial decomposition and further blackens and displaces disability from Cal's progressive transition narrative. Cal's past is a series of used-to-be's that prevented mobility, but “the riots” sow new ground away from the city.

In *Middlesex*, riotous masculinity occurs miles away from Cal's endless flexibility. By the novel's end, Cal lands in his heteronormative body. He lands in the body that was his all along, the body that is a mobile body freed from immobilizing pasts. After the uprising, which is set nearly half-way through the novel, no Black character is mentioned again until the final pages when Cal returns to Detroit for his father's funeral. When Cal addresses Blackness again, he refers to it as “happening all the time, unnoticed, and it was the thing that really mattered.”¹⁰⁵ Equally, he addresses why he left his grandmother out of his subsequent storytelling by

¹⁰² Eugenides, *Middlesex*, 249.

¹⁰³ Carroll, 189-190.

¹⁰⁴ Eugenides, *Middlesex*, 252.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 518.

offering to readers that “I allowed Desdemona to slip out of my narrative because, to be honest, in the dramatic years of my transformation, she slipped out of my attention most of the time.”¹⁰⁶ Conveniently, nonwhiteness, disability and queerness become unintelligible and “slip out of” Cal’s more timely self-making, as he steps into his heteromasculine able-bodied fortune.

Conclusion: Framework as Flashlight

Eugenides is primarily concerned with advancing white able-bodiedness by means of valorizing Cal’s adult, white male body; accordingly, his strategy of narrative sterilization motions the stoppage of queer reproductions in Detroit and in his wider literary imaginary. Eugenides reserves the utopian future for some bodies and not the “no(bodies)”¹⁰⁷ exemplified through the novel’s Black and disabled presence. Black Detroiters and people with disabilities are perhaps “objects in place”¹⁰⁸ that mark time with a monotonous and unchanging patter in *Middlesex*. By arguing that, within the novel and within Detroit itself, Blackness and disability are immobile, or “immovable,” to borrow a term from Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods,¹⁰⁹ I seek to expose *Middlesex*’s limitations and proctor a resourceful use of Black disability methodologies. I imagine that through the “work of detection”¹¹⁰ that Christopher M. Bell envisioned for Black disability work, our methodologies and analyses that aim to humanize and produce more holistic representations of Black people are possible within a novel like *Middlesex*. Therefore, our readings of literature should be an attempt to “rectify the attitudes behind such stereotyping practices.”¹¹¹ In this regard, I analyze Eugenides’s exercise of stereotypes and facile metaphors about biological essentialism, disability, and Blackness in *Middlesex*.

I am transfixed by the questions of where, how, and when gender and sex incoherence appear in the trajectory of Black feminisms, African American Studies, and Disability Studies, and these questions have led me to an unconventional and contradictory text like *Middlesex* for further illumination. I yearn for other Black feminist disability work that can attend to a character like Marius by asking us to compose more sustained discourses around Blackness, gender, and disability

¹⁰⁶ Eugenides, *Middlesex*, 521-522.

¹⁰⁷ Nirmala Erevelles and Andrea Minear, “Unspeakable Offenses: Untangling Race and Disability in Discourses of Intersectionality,” 354.

¹⁰⁸ Audre Lorde qtd. in Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods, “No One Knows the Mysteries at the Bottom of the Ocean,” 4.

¹⁰⁹ McKittrick and Woods, 3.

¹¹⁰ Christopher M. Bell, “Introduction: Doing Representational Detective Work,” 3.

¹¹¹ Quayson, 210.

that do not further buttress ableism, violence, and limited notions of masculine behavior. *Middlesex* may be a novel about intersexuality, but it has much to say about Blackness, Detroit as the Black city time forgot—where growth and progress seems impossible—and about the relationship between Blackness and disability in the medical and literary imaginaries. Admirably, Eugenides attempts a new tale of becoming through a protagonist that readers might find unrelatable. And Cal's mobility and omniscience signify the interwoven and intersectional histories of race, disability, and intersex in America, which is a much-needed intervention.

When Eugenides was asked during an interview about Cal's voice, he responded, "Gradually, I came up with a hybrid voice, well-suited to my theme, that shifted from first-to third-person on a dime. Is it too complicated? I hope not...I didn't want to trip up the reader. Flashlights are provided at all intersections. The reader, however, is expected to look where she's going."¹¹² Unlike Eugenides, I situate an intersectional Black disability methodology here to trip up readers, to walk those intersections he lays out, but with a continued curiosity about in the mobilization(s) of metaphor and sexual, ethnic, and racial representations. I press forth a critique that does not simply follow flash-lit paths of the hegemonic narrative provided, but one that sees possibilities in our complicated embodiments. With this being said, I end this essay with a question about the future of Black Disability Studies posed by Bailey and Mobley, who ask: "What does liberation look like if disabled Black bodies are allowed in our futures?"¹¹³ In response and in conversation with Bailey and Mobley, this essay reads *Middlesex* for Black disability collisions and revolutions. It deliberately does not leave them behind.

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¹¹² Eugenides, "Q&A with Jeffrey Eugenides."

¹¹³ Bailey & Mobley, 34.

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**No Crips Allowed: Magical Negroes, Black Superheroes,
And the Hyper-Abled Black Male Body
In Steven Spielberg's *Amistad* and Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther***

Charles I. Nero

Initially, it might seem odd to discuss shared racial tropes in *Amistad* and *Black Panther*. Not only were the movies created over two decades apart, the films belong to entirely different cinematic genres. Steven Spielberg's *Amistad* (1997) is a historical period drama that is based on the true story of an armed insurrection aboard a 19th century slave ship. Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther* (2018) is a fantasy film that focuses on a futuristic advanced mythical kingdom in Africa that produces superheroes. Nevertheless, these films are connected by their subject matter and a recurring strategy. At their cores, both films emphasize Black resistance to the white supremacy that trans-Atlantic slavery and European imperialism necessitated. Both films deploy as strategy the hyper-abled Black male body as a tool for resisting white supremacy and colonialism.

I call attention to the hyper-abled Black male body in these two films specifically to focus on the Black disability that trans-Atlantic slavery produced. I am writing along the lines of Nirmala Erevelles brilliant reading of Hortense Spillers's now-classic essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," in which producing and maintaining slavery required the impairment of Black bodies. The racialization of slavery meant that Blackness was always impaired, or, as Erevelles concludes, it was "at the historical moment when one class of human beings was transformed into cargo to be transported to the New World that Black bodies become disabled and disabled bodies become black."¹ On the one hand, *Amistad* reflects upon the trans-Atlantic slave experience, while *Black Panther* showcases a Black nation that was spared this terrible ordeal; yet, both create magical worlds in which Black people are hyper-abled. Subsequently, in this essay, I examine the limits of the hyper-abled Black body as a tool of resistance; I also raise the question of whether such a dependence upon a specific gendered type--hyper-abled masculinity--reproduces a logic of white supremacy that equates Blackness with physicality, yet simultaneously denies Black intellect, therefore refuting political agency, or the rights of citizenship.

¹ Nirmala Erevelles, "Becoming Disables/Becoming Black: Crippin' Critical Ethnic Studies from the Periphery" 237.

Amistad

Prior the film's debut in 1997, Steven Spielberg and the film's producer, African American dancer and actress Debbie Allen, held blockbuster aspirations for *Amistad*. Both believed that *Amistad* could build upon the success of *Schindler's List*, Spielberg's historical period blockbuster from 1993. The commercial and critical success of *Schindler's List* had cemented Spielberg's status as a "serious filmmaker," though Spielberg was long credited with developing films that defined Hollywood filmmaking during the 1970s-1990s: namely, *Jaws* (1975), *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), *E. T. The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982), *Poltergeist* (1982), the franchises that stemmed from *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) and *Jurassic Park* (1993). Despite the success of these previous films, *Amistad* was not the powerhouse that Spielberg and Allen had imagined.

Instead, *Amistad* barely recouped its investment and it failed among critics, arguably because the film confused audiences. A possible source of this confusion was because of the decision to transform a genuine story of resistance into an "interracial buddy film," a subgenre that became popular during the Civil Rights Movement and subsequently expanded to include Hollywood cop film franchises, such as *Lethal Weapon* (beginning in 1987), *Beverly Hills Cop* (beginning in 1984), *48 Hours* (beginning in 1982), *Independence Day* (1996) and *Men In Black* (beginning in 1997). These films celebrate the developing bonds between Black and white men who overcome their racial differences and learn to work together to solve a crime, prevent corruption, or even save the planet from alien invasion. At stake in these movies are the interracial relationships between the crime-fighting duos; certainly, the buffed bodies of the captured Africans suggested this possibility. The fitness of the Beninese actor Djimon Hounsou, who played Cinque, the leader of the insurrection, was especially notable. Previously known as a fashion model, Hounsou's first cinematic appearance was as "eye candy" in the pop star Janet Jackson's video "Love Will Never Do" (1989). Hounsou even capitalized on the worldwide exposure he had achieved in *Amistad* by working as an underwear model for fashion designer Calvin Klein.²

² *Amistad* was made on a budget of \$36 million and had a gross revenue of \$44 million, a sum that is clearly not the box office return of a blockbuster (See Box Office Mojo <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/release/rl2168686081/>). By comparison, Spielberg's 1993 historical drama *Schindler's List* was made on a budget of \$22 million and had a gross revenue of \$321 million (See Box Office Mojo: <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/release/rl3949954561/>)

Spielberg's Dreamworks Studio heavily promoted *Amistad* including print and television advertising, billboards, and educational kits sent to public schools. Prior to its opening, stories about the film were featured prominently in national weekly entertainment and news magazines. Djimon Hounsou was even on the cover of *Newsweek* magazine.

Rather than action, *Amistad*'s narrative focus concerned a white male protagonist's transformation from the equivalent of a 19th century ambulance chasing lawyer to a committed abolitionist. The result was that *Amistad* became a tedious, nearly three-hour courtroom drama, something more like a made-for-tv drama series. The film's emphasis on the hyper-abled physicality of the enslaved Africans added to this confusion, as their extremely fit bodies suggested action that never proved central to the narrative. Instead, action was restricted and confined to less than three minutes, occurring at the beginning of the film, as we witness enslaved Blacks taking over the ship. In other words, action was reduced to a cameo in a film about an insurrection.

What, then, do the hyper-abled bodies, primed for action, mean in this film? What does the camera's love affair with Hounsou's physicality mean, as it lingers on his strapping body in multiple scenes? For instance, what objective is being served during the opening scene, when Cinque (Hounsou) emerges from below the ship's deck, semi-nude and wearing only a loincloth, carrying a machete, or later in the film, when he removes all of his clothes and stands fully nude before a raging fire? In these and other shots, the camera focuses on Hounsou's six-pack abs, his chiseled pectoral muscles, his trim and taut waist, and his well-shaped buttocks and arms. Clearly this intense focus of the camera on the musculature of Cinque and the other captured Africans turned them into erotic spectacles. One white female viewer wrote to the popular sex columnist Dan Savage that, after viewing the film, she wondered if she was being racist because she began to have erotic fantasies about enslaving Black men: "I know bondage is a pretty common fantasy," she wrote. "I think what turned me on was the slavery [sic] since I don't think seeing white men in chains would turn me on, only black men. And not handcuffs or rope or leather, but chains."³ Savage's response affirmed the woman's reaction, after he noted that a fellow Black friend had commented to him that "If you're a sexual person, you couldn't watch that movie and not have a fantasy. . . . Those guys in the movie were total Mandingoes. These huge bucks they had to be, I guess, to survive that voyage."⁴

This white woman's inquiry and Savage's response recalls what Saidiya Hartman called "the fashioning of blackness," which is "an ambivalent complex of feelings" that "aroused pity and fear, desire and revulsion, and terror and pleasure," and which also regulates "the spectacle of the auction block."⁵ At the auction block and under the threat of violence, enslaved Blacks were coerced into entertaining

³ Dan Savage, "Savage Love" 151.

⁴ Ibid, 151.

⁵ Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* 27.

their viewers and potential buyers with song and dance. At its inception, American cinema immediately captured this “economy of enjoyment” of Blacks entertaining their white captors, while suffering on the auction block.⁶ In Thomas Edison and Edwin S. Porter’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1903), one of the first “full-length” American movies and the first filmed version of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel, a group of Black children perform a merry buck dance before the scene turns to the serious business of portraying Black people mounting the auction block to be inspected and sold to the highest bidder. *Amistad* continues this economy of enjoyment with the spectacular, hyper-abled bodies of the enslaved Blacks; additionally, the multiple shots of their beautiful, nude Black bodies operate as a “conspiracy of appearances” that acts “to repudiate claims of pain.”⁷ One even wonders about the casting call for extras to play the captive Blacks that likely required that potential actors strip to their skivvies, as casting agents and directors selected only the fittest ones, almost as if they were participating in a slave auction.

Furthermore, Dan Savage’s response that the enslaved had to be “huge bucks” in order to survive the Middle Passage echoes what Disability scholar Anna Mollow sees as a predominant representational strategy of Black bodies as “unvictimized,” a condition that impedes “recognition of suffering, injury, and loss experienced by African Americans.”⁸ Continuing, Mollow notes that the representation of Blacks as unvictimized creates a double bind of contradicting images of “black people as inherently disabled but also as invulnerable to pain, disability, and suffering.”⁹ *Amistad* and Savage’s “Mandingo” claims become ideological coverage that belie the fact that the process of capture and transportation across the ocean horribly victimized and harmed Black bodies. As Robert Edgar Conrad notes in *World of Sorrow: The African Slave Trade to Brazil*, from the moment of capture within the African interior to a march that often consisted of hundreds of miles or more on foot to the coast, bodies were devastated—many were chained, held in pens as they awaited the arrival of a ship, all the while being poorly fed. In *World of Sorrow*, Conrad also describes the bodies of the enslaved arriving at ports as malnourished, diseased, emaciated, and generally showing signs of unbelievable suffering. Observers of the Black captives typically remarked that, among other ailments, they often suffered from: “sunken visages,” “swollen eyelids,” “open wounds” from branding irons, and “pus-filled” eyes; many were “shrivelled to absolute skin and bone,” lay in a “torpid state,” suffered from “the pox,” and were “doubled up in

⁶ Ibid, 27.

⁷ Ibid, 39.

⁸ Anna Mollow, “Unvictimized: Toward a Fat Black Disability Studies” 118.

⁹ Ibid, 118.

a posture which originally want of space had compelled them to adopt.”¹⁰ The spectacularly built bodies of the captive Africans in *Amistad* draws attention to racialization and suffering. Spielberg seemed quite aware of the impact of suffering and deprivation on the bodies of white actors cast as Jews in *Schindler’s List*. Yet, Spielberg, and I speculate Debbie Allen, did not extend this awareness of the effect of suffering onto the bodies of Black people in the Middle Passage. Black bodies in *Amistad* are “unvictimized” as Anna Mallow has pointed out. In his now classic study of cinema, *White*, Richard Dyer remarks that “The built body is a wealthy body. It is well fed and enormous amounts of leisure time have been devoted to it.”¹¹ Dyer’s remark allows us to explore what it means that the tortured, yet still beautiful bodies of enslaved Black men likely signified wealth to white Americans.

In “The Able-Bodied Slave,” Cristina Visperas draws attention to enslaved Blacks as fungible commodities of exchange. Whether “able-bodied” or “disabled,” the slave is an object of value, perhaps if not to labor on the plantation, then for some other use for the production of capital. Visperas writes, “The slave’s seemingly more-than-human abilities, like the sheer capacity for joy and submission, followed precisely from this status of objecthood in which pain simply did not exist, with the capacities and incapacities of the slave body appearing as the richness of conceivable uses to which any commodity or household good could be put.”¹² How the enslaved Africans maintained their wealth--that is, their built bodies--despite the torture and meager food rations during captivity and the Middle Passage is unclear, but they did maintain them and their bodies functioned as gifts to an America starved for moral discernment. Let me illustrate this by discussing a scene from the film in which Cinque learns that the successful results of his first trial have been overturned because of a technicality. The scene is set in the common yard of the jail that holds the enslaved Africans. The Africans have lit a bonfire to celebrate what they believe is their freedom. Upon having the technicality explained to him, an angered Cinque strips off his clothes and reveals nakedness to his Attorney Baldwin and to the viewers. One meaning of Cinque’s action is that he is so outraged that he refuses to wear Western clothes. However, another reason is that this is cinematic shorthand for what happens after the revelation of nudity to Baldwin and the audience. Baldwin is transformed from an attorney who is merely in pursuit of monetary goals to one who more fully embraces abolitionism. The naked Cinque’s built body persuades Baldwin that indeed, the enslaved Black is a man who deserves freedom. Baldwin’s commitment to abolitionism comes full circle. This moment is crucial, because Cinque and the captive Africans never appear

¹⁰ See Robert Edgar Conrad, *World of Sorrow: The African Slave Trade to Brazil* 40-47.

¹¹ Richard Dyer, *White* 155.

¹² Cristina Visperas, “The Able-Bodied Slave” 98.

nude again in the film. They have transferred their wealth onto predominantly white Americans to deepen their moral conviction against slavery.

This use of the Black male nude to persuade a white man of Black men's value has its origins in abolitionist literary discourse. For example, in antislavery writings published and republished in America between 1790 and 1820., John Saillant identified an eroticized and enslaved Black male friend of a white male. These writings used a strategy of sentimentalism and homoeroticism to unite Black men and white men in opposition to slavery. According to Saillant, "White men eroticized black men in antislavery writings because in American ideology sentimentalism and republicanism grounded their vision of the body politic in a fundamental likeness among men that produces benevolence," a value believed to be necessary for republican democracy.¹³ It is worth noting that this eroticized and enslaved Black male in abolitionist literature exemplifies the concept of fungibility, as his body is "unvictimized" and earns continual praise for its beauty from the white men who encounter the Black friend. The sexy Black male bodies in *Amistad* continue this 19th century convention of the (homo)eroticized Black friend and become, in cinematic code, "magical negroes," a representational invention of late 20th century American film. Magical negroes are invested with powers or insights that they subsequently offer to whites, in the hopes that they will develop greater and deeper moral strength. Despite all they have gone through, Black bodies are "unvictimized," magically impervious to the effects of suffering and deprivation. As magical negroes, they use their wealth to make whites better whites, as in the case of Attorney Baldwin. Neither in the past nor the present, an emaciated, suffering Black body has no wealth to give to audiences clamoring for moral discernment about the injustice of slavery.

Black Panther

Notably, there are no disabled people in the kingdom of Wakanda. This does not mean that no one is impaired. We see elderly people. In fact, one of the leading characters is Zuri who is played by Forest Whitaker, the academy award-winning actor who is well-known for having a hereditary condition called *ptosis*, which prevents his left eye from completely opening. As a trusted adviser, Zuri occupies a position of authority in the court. However, the primary Wakandans on the screen are not impaired in any identifiable way, but instead, have extremely fit bodies.

Once again, Richard Dyer's observations about the role of the built body for the imperialist enterprise in cinema are instructive for understanding the use of the Black body in Wakanda. Dyer states that, from Tarzan to Rambo, the white

¹³ John Saillant, "The Black Body Erotic and the Republican Body Politic, 1790-1820" 406.

muscle film tradition sees “the body as submitted to and glorified by the planning and ambition of the mind; colonial worlds are likewise represented as inchoate terrain needing the skill, sense and vision of the coloniser to be brought to order.” Further, “The muscle hero has landscaped his body with muscles and he controls them superbly and sagely; the lands of the muscle film are enfeebled or raw bodies requiring discipline.”¹⁴ In *Black Panther*, the kingdom of Wakanda stands in an ironic position to Dyer’s assertion. To the outside world, Wakanda is an impoverished land with emaciated Black people, yet the reality of life in Wakanda could not be further from this image. Wakanda is profoundly wealthy because it has a mineral called “vibranium.” Because of this powerful mineral, barely known to the outside world, Wakanda has attained a level of unprecedented scientific development. Wakanda is the opposite of the image of the technologically underdeveloped countries of Africa that exist in today’s popular imagination. Wakanda even produces a Black superhero, the Black Panther. This image of Wakanda plays upon the stereotype of the impoverished post-colonial African state. The fit, hyper-abled bodies of Wakanda’s elite warrior caste put to rest any queries about the need for a colonial power to bring their country order and stability. Of course, in *Black Panther* these built bodies--both male and female ones--are justified and probable, not like the magical ones in *Amistad*. These hyper-abled bodies belong to Wakandan nobility, who possess the wealth and the leisure time to devote to the building of their spectacular muscularity.

Despite its advanced science and wealth, *Black Panther* has a very unmodern political structure, one that predates the creation of the modern state. Wakanda’s fate can be determined by the feudal, pre-modern practice of hand-to-hand combat among members of its elite warrior caste. This governing structure is revealed in two hand-to-hand combat scenes that feature extremely built Black male bodies. Because of its governance structure, which seems to focus on the hyper-abled Black male body, *Black Panther* never breaks away from the white supremacist stereotype that denies intellectual ability to Blacks. Wakanda has not created (or, one wonders, is it capable of creating?) a governing structure that matches its level of scientific advancements. In spite of its scientific innovations, Wakanda’s hyper-abled Black male bodies do not create an antidote to Western imperialism. In fact, when the kingdom entrusts its fate to an individual’s martial superiority, it denies any space for public debate and argumentation. Public policy ultimately rests with the fittest Black man’s body, whether he is right or wrong, or whether the rest of the people agree with him or not. The opinions of the spectators--the entire kingdom--do not count. This unaccountability of the kingdom--the spectators to the martial tradition--is precisely what happens when the antagonist Erik Killmonger claims his birthright by challenging the ruling King T’Challa to hand-to-hand

¹⁴ Richard Dyer, *White*, 165.

combat, winning, and becoming Wakanda's new king. Erik Killmonger is also the film's figure for disability as he embodies deviance and madness associated with African American masculinity.

Although Killmonger is the son of a Wakandan prince, N'Jobu, the film implies that his experience in America corrupts or pollutes the young royal and propels him to madness. While in America, N'Jobu marries an African American woman and begins to identify with the descendants of trans-Atlantic slavery, or "his brothers and sisters," as he writes in a letter to his son. Once exposed to Black American suffering, the prince abandons the isolationist policies that have allowed Wakanda to thrive for centuries (perhaps millennia), and he concocts a plan along with a white Afrikaner arms dealer--of all people, given the anti-Black policies that group used to establish its imperialist presence in South Africa--to steal vibranium, allegedly for use in the liberation of oppressed African Americans. The Wakan-dans discover N'Jobu's plan, and he is killed, but his son remains in America.

Here is where James Snead's "omission" becomes useful and insightful. Killmonger's mad Black masculinity is constructed through what Snead called "omission," one of the major forms of stereotyping in classic Hollywood film. Reflecting upon the use of omission as a method of filmmaking, Snead calls our attention to the historical practice of censorship, in which scenes that included Black actors whom white audiences found objectionable often are cut from a film. Meanwhile, the film subsequently, was spliced together again as if the offending Blackness never existed. "Omission and exclusion," Snead declares, "are perhaps the most widespread tactics of racial stereotyping but also the most difficult to prove because their manifestation is precisely absence itself."¹⁵ I contend that it is absence that allows audiences to use stereotypes of inner-city Black dysfunction to explain Killmonger's madness. The film encourages this stereotyping through an establishing shot. A title appears on the screen "Los Angeles 1992." It is immediately after the uprising that followed the non-guilty verdict for the police who viciously beat Rodney King. The *mise-en-scène* consists of a run-down, neglected basketball court with a plastic milk crate being used as a basketball hoop. It is nighttime and Black boys are playing ball and girls are jumping rope. Then, the camera moves across the court, up a chain-link fence in disrepair, and onto an apartment building that we learn is where N'Jobu lives. This establishing shot of a neglected inner city and the stereotypes it can encourage comes into play upon a closer examination of Killmonger's motives.

The film's explicit claim is that Killmonger's predominant motive for returning to Wakanda to claim his birthright as its ruler is a type of revenge of Shakespearean dimensions and centers around his father's death. But Killmonger is not Hamlet,

¹⁵ James Snead, *White Screens/Black Images* 16

notably, because there is no Queen Gertrude. Killmonger's mother is never mentioned in the film, although Ryan Coogler explained to reporter Ryan Parker that the mother's omission was due to being incarcerated. Additionally, the plans N'Jobu was discussing at the film's beginning, prior to his murder, were about breaking his wife out of jail.¹⁶ Whether or not we believe Coogler's omitted plotpoint, viewers can still fill in the omitted plot with the prevailing stereotypes about urban African American family dysfunction. On the one hand, if we believe Coogler, we are left with a stereotype of an inner-city Black family who suffers from the mother's incarceration for an unnamed crime, along with a murdered father and an orphaned son. On the other hand, without the additional information that Coogler provides, we are left with a stereotype about dysfunction, this time, the murdered father and a Black son who is raised by a single black female parent. Either way, the dysfunctional inner-city Black family produces the monstrously mad Killmonger, the mythological, violent super-predator with "no conscience, no empathy," to use Hillary Clinton's words during the 1996 presidential campaign.¹⁷

Killmonger's madness is further written on his skin through the practice of scarification. Killmonger reveals that he has scarred his skin with hundreds, of marks, with each one representing someone he has killed. Killmonger's scarification seemingly connects him to the sub-Saharan people of Wakanda. Specifically, his scars resemble those on the faces of the Border Tribe. Yet, it is also important to note that scarification in sub-Saharan Africa is a communal practice, one that marks group affiliation, rites of passage, and other events a group deems relevant. Killmonger's scarification is performed in the absence of communal approval. Because his scarification is self-inflicted, it is an ironic reminder of the brutalities inflicted upon Black bodies during and after trans-Atlantic slavery.

Amistad and *Black Panther* appear to be quite different, but in their reliance upon the redemptive power of the hyper-fit Black male body, both films embrace fantasy. In *Amistad*, the hyper-fit Black body becomes the magical Negro, whose body is a sign of his wealth that he offers to the ambivalent white male to make him a better white male. Once he has shared his wealth, the hyper-abled Black male departs and returns to his country in Africa. Unfortunately, we learn that his country no longer exists. At the conclusion of *Black Panther*, the hyper-abled Black males who encounter the West are corrupted by the legacy of colonialism and trans-Atlantic slavery. As King T'Challa questions the isolationism that has allowed his people to prosper and prepares to lead them to embrace former imperial powers, one can only wonder how ill-prepared the Wakandan state, as it exists, is for such an encounter.

¹⁶ "Ryan Parker, "Black Panther: Ryan Cooper Reveals What Happened"

¹⁷ "Mrs. Hillary Clinton Campaign Speech."

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Horror as Resistance: Reimagining Blackness and Madness

Michelle Jarman

Horror genres in film and literature have a uniquely troubling history in representing disabled bodies and minds. Visible disabilities—scars, disfigurement, blindness, limps, prosthetics—and mental disabilities, especially conditions associated with madness, have been used repeatedly, or rather, excessively, as symbolic shorthand to signify evil, or to signal villainy. Disability Studies scholars have rightly critiqued such spectacularization of disability to invoke horror. David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder argue that visual and literary representations of disability are used to evoke intense affective responses. In horror films especially, they suggest, “disabled bodies have been constructed cinematically and socially to function as delivery vehicles in the transfer of extreme sensation to audiences.”¹ Horror genres demonstrate a “repetitious reliance,”² as Mitchell and Snyder put it, on specific disabled bodies and minds, especially the violent psychiatric patient and the monstrous villain.

In recent years, however, some writers and filmmakers have worked within the horror genre to upend stereotypical tropes of disability; instead, they use the intense emotional power and violence of horror to engage in contemporary social critique. Much of my work has investigated discursive processes and representations of mental disability and race; building on these interests, this essay focuses specifically on African American filmmaker Jordan Peele and novelist Victor LaValle to analyze how they grapple with the interwoven representations of madness and Blackness within fictional landscapes of horror. Specifically, I explore how Peele and LaValle situate madness and Blackness in relationship, and how each represents these entities, not as metaphor or narrative prop, but as integral (albeit distinct) patterns in the mosaic of cultural intervention.

In her groundbreaking book, *Black Madness: Mad Blackness*, Therí Pickens provides a map for critically engaging with these categories. She theorizes madness and Blackness—both defined broadly—as having a “complex constellation of relationships...constituted within the fissures, breaks, and gaps in critical and literary texts. Black madness and mad Blackness then are not interchangeable or reciprocal. Rather, they foreground the multiple and, at times, conflicting epistemological and ontological positions at stake when reading the two alongside each

¹ David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, “Body Genres,” 186, italics in original.

² Mitchell and Snyder, 185.

other.”³ Like Pickens, I define madness and Blackness broadly: They have biological and discursive dimensions and are cultural constructs with material histories of their own. From Disability and Mad Studies, madness functions as an identity claim and community affiliation, linking people across cognitive diagnoses—from intellectual disability, learning disabilities, psychiatric conditions, and neurodiversity. While I am invested in the affirming impulses of this definition, I appreciate Pickens’s rejoinder that mad functions simultaneously and potentially as insult,⁴ a reminder that our critical engagement must consider those gaps between pride and put down, as well. Blackness, like madness, also has a range of meaning: It functions “as a racial category, cultural affiliation, and social position.”⁵ This critical cartography is instructive: Representations of madness and Blackness may be focused on specific bodies and minds, but larger systems, structures, and beliefs are crucial to understanding how these categories overlap and push against each other.

Turning to a contemporary Black aesthetic of horror, this essay explores the ways film and literature develop complex relationships between madness and Blackness to stage various social critiques of white racism, police bias, the fantasy of post-raciality, and the voracious violence of white male supremacist ideology. Using Jordan Peele’s *Get Out* as a starting point, I pay specific attention to his use of mental control, which evoke horror and madness, as a masterful critique of white racial power, haunted by histories of enslavement and racial violence. From there, I turn to Victor LaValle’s recent novels, *The Devil in Silver* and *The Changeling*. Both literary works feature monstrous figures, but the metaphorical significance of these characters does not stigmatize mental distress or people of color. On the contrary, the child-stealing troll in *The Changeling* and the murderous patient in *The Devil in Silver* signify resistance to ideologies of white, able-minded privilege. Peele and LaValle use horror to unmask enduring legacies of racial oppression; further, madness, as lived experience or social product, is complexly woven into these fictional landscapes.

Horror functions as a powerful genre to deliver racial social critiques in large part because it relies upon intense emotional delivery. In that vein, Peele and LaValle shock viewers and readers with the insidious violence fueled by the commonplace of white racism. These works evoke pain, fear, rage, and resistance, but ultimately, they push for a deeper recognition of the enduring violence of racism, even among viewers and readers who already embrace racial equality and disability rights. In order to challenge audiences to see race and disability in more complicated ways, these works call forth mourning as process of resistance, and map out

³ Therí Pickens, *Black Madness: Mad Blackness*, loc 240.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, loc 268.

representational geographies where madness and Blackness intertwine to shape new communities and new imaginaries. Renowned poet and writer, Claudia Rankine, provides a powerful framework for my use of mourning as a critical tool. In a recent essay, Rankine meditates on a conversation with a friend who describes “the condition of black life” as one of “mourning,” a description, in an era of anti-racist activism, juxtaposed with the rise of white nationalism, she finds resonant. As she explains:

Anti-black racism is in the culture. It’s in our laws, in our advertisements, in our friendships, in our segregated cities, in our schools, in our Congress, in our scientific experiments, in our language, on the Internet, in our bodies no matter our race, in our communities, and, perhaps most devastatingly, in our justice system. The unarmed, slain black bodies in public spaces turn grief into our everyday feeling that something is wrong everywhere and all the time, even if locally things appear normal. Having coffee, walking the dog, reading the paper, taking the elevator to the office, dropping the kids off at school: All of this good life is surrounded by the ambient feeling that at any given moment, a black person is being killed in the street or in his home by the armed hatred of a fellow American.⁶

Tracing historical legacies of systemic white racism, Rankine notes a difference between the contemporary struggle animated by the Black Lives Matter movement, with earlier racial justice struggles focused on civil rights. Beyond an assertion of rights, Rankine suggests, “a more internalized change is being asked for: recognition.”⁷

Further acknowledging that structures and systems must be transformed, Rankine argues that the more urgent and enduring change, the change that will actually make systemic changes sustainable, is a “rerouting of interior belief.”⁸ Using intensity of effect, these works activate mourning through representations of contemporary racialized violence that is tied to historic legacies of systemic racism. At the same time, Peele and LaValle map new geographies of resistance, spaces where processes of unlearning racism, sexism, and ableism are prioritized. I argue that these works of horror, through their engagement with genealogies of Blackness and madness, participate in this process of “rerouting beliefs;” moreover, within spatial geographies of removal (imposed and chosen), these works offer new imaginaries of resistance, community, and relationality across race and disability.

⁶ Claudia Rankine, “The Condition of Black Life Is One of Mourning,” loc 1607.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., loc 1672.

Part 1: *Get Out* of the Post-Racial Dystopia

Jordan Peele's film sensation, *Get Out*, exploits the horror genre to expose the lie of a "post-racial" society. Peele wrote the screenplay during the Obama presidency, so by the time the film was released in 2017, following the dramatic political mainstreaming of white nationalism through Trumpism and the alt-right, that lie was already dramatically exposed in the United States. Within this milieu, Peele's film provided a cultural catharsis, demanding a direct confrontation with white supremacy and its enduring violence, through horror laced with comedy. The premise of the film has an elegant, terrible, simplicity: Chris (who is Black), goes for a weekend getaway from the city with his girlfriend, Rose (who is White), to meet her parents and stay at their home in a wealthy, rural community. Rose's parents, the Armitages, present themselves as racially progressive, and they welcome Chris with open arms. Beneath the surface, however, this family is masterminding a psychological, surgical slave trade, and Chris has been lured by Rose onto the auction block. Viewers discover that Chris is one of many Black victims that Rose and her brother have lured (by seduction or brute force) to the compound where the family's wealthy, white, aging, and often ailing friends gather to inspect new recruits as corporeal commodities. Ultimately, the new arrival, in this case Chris, is auctioned off to the highest bidder. Rose's mother, a psychologist, uses hypnosis to control the unwitting recruits, and Rose's father, a neurosurgeon, later completes the replacement process, relegating the Black captive to a role of "passenger" in his or her own body.

Although this family business of harvesting Black bodies is meant to push beyond reality into horror, the film gains emotional force by situating Chris within a familiar racialized social context. The opening scene of the film sets the tone of racial precarity and foreboding. Walking late at night, a young Black man becomes lost in a wealthy suburban neighborhood. As he talks on the phone about being confused by the streets, a white car pulls up and stops behind him. He quickly turns to head in the other direction, clearly aware that he may be in danger. Suddenly, a masked person jumps him from behind and drags him to the trunk of the car. We learn later the Black man is Andrew or Dré, and Rose's brother, Jeremy, is his assailant. This scene immediately brings into focus the racialized dimensions of spatial geographies. The neighborhood, an affluent suburban street with large front lawns, tall trees, and expansive homes, reads as a white space. Viewers realize the Black man is both innocent and in danger; his precarity in this neighborhood immediately evokes memories of Trayvon Martin, targeted walking through a "gated" community, and the many other Black people targeted while doing everyday activities such as talking on the phone, driving, running, or making his/her way home. This street may be recognizable as safe for white people, but Black lives are at risk.

Situated in a wealthy, wooded enclave, the Armitage family property and environs are similarly coded as white spaces. On their drive up from the city, Rose hits a deer, and, not surprisingly, the responding officer asks Chris for identification. Rose jumps to his defense, insisting that Chris doesn't have to comply because she was the one driving. In this interaction, Rose seemingly demonstrates her loyalty; notably, she expresses this by extending her white privilege to secure clearance for him to occupy the space. Her father, Dean, plays a similar role when he explains the presence of Georgina and Walter, their Black housekeeper and groundskeeper. Acknowledging how it "looks" for them to have Black servants, he explains that they kept them on after his parents died—because they had been such good caregivers.

As Chris discovers, Georgina and Walter were both seduced by Rose, taken captive, and transformed into vessels now occupied by Rose's grandparents. Yet it is not the presence of Black bodies that troubles Chris, but their robotic behavior, their flat affect. In one conversation with Georgina, as she tries to assure him about the Armitage family, her deeper emotions rise to the surface, and tears begin to roll down her cheek as she says, "No, no, no." She soon recovers herself and assures Chris that the Armitages treat her and Walter "like family." In her position as family member/captive, Georgina begins to expose the benevolent racism and neo-planation within which she and Walter are trapped.

Peele's configuration of contemporary racism through the legacies of captivity and human bondage connects to Christina Sharpe's figuration of living "in the wake."⁹ Sharpe acknowledges the haunting, enduring, and ongoing racial injustice of Black lives marked for immanent death. Sharpe calls for doing "wake work,"¹⁰ which entails resisting erasure of history, defending the dead, and imagining Black futures. For Sharpe, the wake has multiple meanings for understanding Blackness in a racist society. The wake recalls the hold of slave ships and the whitewater wake trailing back toward a lost homeland; the displacement and disproportional impact of natural disasters on people of color; and the resistance to enduring racial oppression. She explains that doing wake work compels us to "think through containment, regulation, punishment, capture, and captivity and the ways the manifold representations of blackness become the symbol, par excellence, for the less-than-human being condemned to death."¹¹ In Peele's horror landscape, Chris is marked for something akin to death, but not as final; his consciousness will be subjugated, but his body occupied. The Armitages envision social reordering through medical colonization. They project a surface image of interracial harmony and progressive integration of (previously) white social geographies; underneath, they are enacting the ultimate post-racial dystopia of white supremacy.

⁹ Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, 3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Sharpe, 21.

While Peele's racial critique functions as the focal point of the film, the horror plot is also driven by disability. As Chris and Rose mingle at the garden party, viewers come to realize that he is in fact the living object of a silent auction. Jim Nelson, the highest bidder, has lost his vision, so his interest in Chris, a successful photographer, is motivated by his desire for Chris's talent and by a generalized desire for cure. As the guests assess Chris, viewers come to understand that the other Black people—Georgina, Walter, Dré (who attends with a much older white woman)—have become shells, occupied by formerly aging, disabled white people. Peele lays out the logic of ableist white entitlement, where enhancement and cure for the white wealthy class depends upon the sacrifice and disposability of Black bodyminds. Disability Studies scholars use the term *bodyminds* to underscore the interrelationship between the physical and the cognitive. But in the Armitage horror, the *bodymind* must be split, with the body preserved, but cognition and agency suppressed. Ironically, in Chris's case, the "buyer" wants his vision restored, and he also wants to possess Chris's aesthetic insight—his creative expression. Nielsen flatters himself, thinking that, as an art critic, he can better appreciate Chris, even as his respect will result in Chris's destruction. The process of dis-possession is a powerful form of hypnosis executed by Missy, Rose's mother. Using the spoon in her teacup, she pushes Chris to a "sunken place," where he is psychically removed from control of his *bodymind*. Visually, Peele represents this as Chris falling into darkness, floating beneath a small window through which he can view the world above him. He can witness and suffer, but he cannot act autonomously or testify to this sunken reality. In effect, the horror story is both racial appropriation and production of madness.

By situating madness (through psychological control of Chris's mind) at the center of this horror story, and by connecting his captivity to legacies of enslavement and oppression, Peele engages in Sharpe's "wake work." In order to address madness and Blackness together, these elements are crucial: exposing historic and contemporary racial violence that contributes to madness and demanding care for mental distress. Simultaneously, madness (both material and metaphorical) can be disruptive to anti-Black racism. As La Marr Jurelle Bruce suggests, madness is imbricated in the Middle Passage, juxtaposed to Reason (capital R), but as such, madness is non-normative, disruptive, and productively disorderly: "Madness, like diaspora, is both location and locomotion, both place and process."¹² As an analytical category, madness calls attention to histories of erasure and violence, the leaky borders of diagnostic categories, and challenges ideas of cure or repair, forging instead an alternative pathway, geography, and process. As Bruce suggests, Mad Studies, incorporated with disability and Critical Race Theories provides a methodology that "listens for ghosts, madpeople, outcasts, and disembodied voic-

¹² La Marr Jurelle Bruce, "Mad is a Place; or, the Slave Ship Tows the Ship of Fools," 306.

es that trespass, like stowaways, in modernity; it perceives the expressive potential in the so-called rants and raves of madpeople.”¹³ This attention to madness and Blackness comes through in Peele’s film, as Chris pushes to connect to the Black “ghosts”—Georgina, Walter, and Dré—who have been relegated to the sunken place. Dramatically, Chris’s awakening takes place when he inadvertently breaks Dré’s hypnosis with a camera flash, and Dré desperately uses the moment to wake Chris up with the ominous warning, “Get out! Get the fuck out of here!”¹⁴

Ultimately, Chris does make a spectacular escape. After being strapped to a chair in pre-operative limbo for two days, he plugs his ears to avoid hypnosis and enacts a cathartic revenge. Killing everyone but Rose and Walter to make his way outside, they overtake him when he crashes the car the end of the driveway. Chris uses the flash to awaken sunken-Walter, who, semi-conscious of his pre-Walter self, shoots Rose, then turns the rifle on himself. At that moment, a police car turns into the drive. This scene becomes the racial mirror and turning point: Rose, lying bleeding on the driveway, lifts her head and gestures toward the car. Time stops. Viewers recognize that Rose, the beautiful white villain, holds the power over a Black man’s life. Peele’s original ending would have delivered the “punch in the gut,” as he states in the directorial voice-over, to any enduring fantasies of post-racialism: The police get out of the car and Chris ends up in prison because the house and all the evidence supporting his version of events are destroyed in the fire. But Peele, recognizing a collective need for levity, went with the more hopeful (arguably less realistic) ending. Instead of the police, Chris’s friend, Rod, steps out of his official TSA security car. Throughout the film, Rod provides comic relief, warning Chris with far-fetched (prescient) conspiracy theories: “white people love to make black people into sex slaves.” His fantastical fears become prophetic, so he is not surprised to find Chris covered in blood with bodies scattered on the drive and the house burning down behind him. Although this provides a collective sigh of relief for audiences, against the backdrop of right-wing conspiracy theories driven by racism and white male grievance—spread not only by fringe groups, but by (formerly) presidential twitter feed—this ending reminds audiences to interrogate which stories of oppression are given validity and which are relegated to the “sunken place” in the contemporary U.S. social landscape.

Part 2: Relational Unlearning and Disrepair

Victor LaValle, an African American author from Queens, New York, grapples with intersections of race and madness in many of his works. Like Peele, LaValle uses horror to shift the focus from “monstrous” villain, or psychopath, to social

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Jordan Peele, *Get Out*.

and systemic disorders. In many of his works, LaValle features characters with psychiatric conditions, and he utilizes the horror genre to dramatize the fear, chaos, and occasional comedy produced by madness. Drawing from personal and familial experience with mental illness diagnoses and psychiatric hospitalizations, he depicts his characters with a level of empathy and recognition that forces readers to engage with their cognitive complexity and social insight. Analyzing two novels, *The Devil in Silver* and *The Changeling*, this section investigates LaValle's representations of race and madness, both of which are wrapped up in the processes of growth for the main character: first, chaotic misidentification of and battling with the villain(s); and second, unlearning racism and paternalism through intimate relationships. Crucial to navigating LaValle's literary horror landscapes, however, are the dynamic, often conflicted relationships between characters; in fact, these relationships are critical to processes of unlearning racism and ableism and moving toward Rankine's "rerouting of interior beliefs."¹⁵

LaValle's *The Devil in Silver* is a cross between Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*—a 21st century horror story set in an underfunded state mental hospital (aptly called New Hyde) in Queens. In an NPR interview about the novel, LaValle describes a haunted feeling he remembers from visiting family members in state hospitals as a child: "I have a very intimate knowledge of the world of the mentally ill and of life inside ... public hospitals, and the way people are treated in there and the way that they try to survive." *The Devil in Silver* gives shape to haunting childhood imaginings of the psychiatric ward. LaValle depicts the unique horrors of New Hyde through the experiences of Pepper, a middle-aged white man who is put on a 72-hour hold after a scuffle with three off-duty police officers. More a result of the officers' laziness than his madness, Pepper ends up in a locked psychiatric ward—a brief admittance that extends indefinitely. Reminiscent of Kesey's Randle McMurphy, Pepper doesn't officially "belong" in the hospital; however, his journey becomes one of affiliation with other patients, even with the violent Devil at the center of the novel¹⁶.

A violent, horrifying creature ultimately identified as Mr. Vesserplein, this figure is a patient who has survived for years in solitary confinement. Housed within a "repurposed" stairwell, he regularly escapes to violently attack, and even kill, other patients on the ward. Readers first encounter the Devil when he attacks Pepper in his room. After a botched escape attempt, for weeks, Pepper is heavily medicated and tethered to his bed. Late one night, Pepper watches in disbelief as a ceiling tile is removed and a quasi-mythic figure descends into his room. LaValle's description

¹⁵ Rankine, "The Condition," loc 1672.

¹⁶ I use this term to acknowledge the language used in the novel, not to attribute specific characteristics to this figure.

highlights the animalistic: He has feet like “horseshoes,” a massive head, “covered in matted fur.”¹⁷ Although frail looking, the man proves to be shockingly strong; he rips Pepper’s restraints, throws him to the floor, and stomps on his chest, breaking several ribs. More shocking than the attack, however, is the staff response—or lack thereof. When they finally respond to Pepper’s screaming, they calmly lead the man away and treat Pepper as if he has simply had a nightmare, attending superficially to his wounds and dismissing his reaction as overwrought and inappropriate—even though he has broken ribs and is bleeding through his clothes.

On the surface, the figure of the Devil fits into common horror tropes, into Mitchell and Snyder’s “narratives of...pathology.”¹⁸ However, after the attack, equally horrifying is the staff’s refusal to acknowledge or address the danger that the Devil poses or the terror he rightly evokes in patients. Mr. Vesserplein is, after all, torturing people on the ward. The material reality of his attacks is crucial, because, within the hospital, patient testimonies are disregarded. Inhabiting a state hospital, a mad place, causes one to be, in Margaret Price’s words, “obliterated as a speaking subject.”¹⁹ The material, the mad, and the metaphorical are on slippery ground in the psych ward. Regardless of diagnosis, Pepper realizes how easily his words, his fears, and his truth can be dismissed or ignored because he occupies the geographic space of the mental hospital. Madness defines him; his narrative is no longer validated, no longer his own.

Realizing the staff and doctors at New Hyde will not address the Devil, Pepper and three other inmates, Loochie, a teenage African American girl, Kofi, a middle-aged Ugandan immigrant, and Dorry, an older white woman, plot a mini take-over to exact revenge. They secretly stop taking their medications and launch a surprisingly effective revolt, where they lock the two on-duty staff members in a conference room. Soon, however, the plan falls apart in spectacular fashion. The nurse ultimately calls the police, who enter amid a chaotic struggle. Loochie is fighting fiercely but being overpowered by Mr. Vesserplein. In the tumult, Kofi comes to her aid with a handful of syringes; however, at the last moment, Dorry turns on Kofi to protect Vesserplein. At this fateful moment, the police run in, guns drawn:

An old white woman fighting off an armed black attacker? That’s not a difficult equation to solve. You can do it at home, without a calculator... One of the officers ran forward and tackled the old woman out of the way. The rest fired on the crazed man. Then the cops fired forty-one shots. The assailant was hit nineteen times.²⁰

¹⁷ Victor LaValle, *The Devil in Silver*, 103.

¹⁸ Mitchell and Snyder, 186.

¹⁹ Margaret Price, *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability in Academic Life*, 27, italics in original.

²⁰ LaValle, *The Devil*, 209-10.

In this instant, when Kofi is gunned down by the police, the source of horror in the novel shifts. The specific details LaValle depicts—fired upon forty-one times, hit nineteen times—reference another infamous police shooting from 1999. Amadou Diallo, an unarmed West African man with no criminal record, was gunned down in the doorway of his Bronx apartment by the New York City police. The officers misidentified Mr. Diallo as a rape suspect, and when he reached for his identification, officers assumed that he was reaching for a gun and subsequently opened fire. Like many of the high-profile killings that have taken place more recently, the killing of Diallo set off massive protests across the city; also, like too many cases, the officers were ultimately acquitted.

LaValle's decision to re-animate Diallo's shooting within the novel is significant. He implies that the disposable bodyminds and violent logics—almost expected and so easily concealed in the confines of the locked ward—are mirrored by the racism and saneism in society. In this way, LaValle shifts the source of the horror from the monstrous body of the Devil to the monstrous, state-sanctioned violence enacted upon people of color with mental disabilities. In an analysis of Tim Burton and Stephen King, Melinda Hall argues that selected works of horror offer social critiques of able-bodied/able-minded privilege, and actively resist the construct of disability/disfigurement as horror. As Hall suggests, specific works in the genre push audiences to recognize instead, "what is horrifying is society and its rigid cruelty. Exclusion, cruelty, and normalization are posed as threat and elicit audience dis-identification."²¹

LaValle enacts such a reversal by switching the lens from the Devil to the tragic predictability of Kofi's death. The horror, suddenly, is the breathtaking speed between the entrance of the police and Kofi's execution; the horror is the media coverage, which repeatedly projects images of Kofi, his hair and clothes in disarray, as mad and dangerous. The horror is the necessity of LaValle's fictive memorialization of Amadou Diallo—his reminder to readers of the everyday violence and danger—where any Black person could be misidentified as "suspect." Claudia Rankine captures the embodied/emotional pain of this deadly repetition in *Citizen—A Lyric*: "And you are not the guy and still you fit the description because there is only one guy who is always the guy fitting the description / In a landscape drawn from an ocean bed, you can't drive yourself sane—so angry you can't drive yourself sane."²² The blurring of sanity and madness is essential to this racial intervention. As Pickens points out, in Black literary traditions, "madness surfaces not only as pathology or as part of a holy fool tradition, but also as a viable alternative

²¹ Melinda Hall, "Horrible Heroes: Liberating Alternative Visions of Disability in Horror," para 14.

²² Rankine, *Citizen—A Lyric*, loc 513.

to engagements with white racism even if it does not result in increased agency.”²³ This expansive understanding of madness and its endless folding into Blackness reminds readers of the disruptive, yet elusive nature of the term.

While Kofi’s death and the mistreatment of patients unmask the madness of carceral systems, LaValle is also interested in how patients develop relational networks within the confines of New Hyde—not only to survive, but to gain perspective and insight. After Kofi’s death, Pepper becomes more reflective of his own biases and sense of entitlement. As a white man accustomed to brash action, he begins to question how his brashness impacts other people. As he develops more intimate connections with other patients at New Hyde, he realizes he “belongs” there as much (or as little) as any of them, not based on diagnosis, but on affinity. Notably, his reconciliation with madness works in tandem with confronting internalized racial biases. Pepper’s “rerouting of interior beliefs”²⁴ initiates in mourning Kofi’s death, but deepens through reciprocal friendships with Loochie, a Black teenager, and Sue, an undocumented Chinese immigrant. I trace these relationships because through them, Pepper reorients himself to confront able-mindedness or sanism and to challenge internalized white racism as well as simplistic, toxic expressions of masculinity.

This rerouting of belief becomes shaped by his experience at New Hyde, especially as Pepper shifts from fighting the situation to becoming part of small community of friends. The representational geography of the “undercommons,” articulated by Fred Moten and Stefano Harney is useful in understanding Pepper’s transformative relationships. Moten and Harney describe the undercommons as a fugitive space, an underground of subversive intellectuals, of refugees. The undercommons sustains a philosophy of abolition, “not so much the abolition of prisons but the abolition of a society that could have prisons.”²⁵ While Harney and Moten occasionally use “crazy,” “delusional,” or “broken,” metaphorically, they resist traditional definitions of these terms as well as the imperative of fixing people described this way. The undercommons is a space of disrepair—of not seeking treatment or cure, but seeking pathways, connections, and improvisation. Through disorienting and reorienting relationships, Pepper, Loochie, and Sue inhabit spaces of the undercommons, even within the institution. Within this frame, Pepper’s relationships with Loochie and Sue might be read as relations of disrepair, as relationships that emerge through madness, acknowledging mad spaces and experiences, but that do not attempt to fix or repair traits labeled broken or disordered. Instead, these relationships challenge and support transformation, evoking critical reflection and reorientation of belief.

²³ Pickens, loc 483.

²⁴ Rankine, “The Condition,” loc 1672.

²⁵ Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, 40.

Pepper develops a deep friendship, almost a father role with Loochie, and a romantic relationship with Sue, and both women challenge him to confront his white, male, able-minded privilege. Still a teenager, Loochie has already been in the state hospital system for six years, and Pepper both pities and respects this history. Early on, Loochie confronts Pepper for acting like he's "not one of us"²⁶ because Pepper doesn't have a psychiatric diagnosis. He realizes, however, that resisting being identified as mad creates a false, or undesirable, barrier between people he cares for and himself; as well, his being a patient within the system of New Hyde makes him "one of them." The medico-carceral structures of power act upon him regardless of a diagnosis. This sinks in when he asserts his right not to take his medications. The nurse responds, "But refusal is taken as a sign that your illness is in control of you."²⁷ He points out that his refusal may indicate that he is feeling well, but she counters, "If you was healthy, you wouldn't refuse!"²⁸ This catch-22 reminds Pepper of past conversations he had with Black co-workers about police harassment. When they complained about the sheer number of times they were stopped and searched by police, he would dismissively say, "If you had nothing to hide, you wouldn't say no"²⁹ to being searched. After being caught up in the psychiatric system, however, he realizes that he is now marked as a person who needs oversight. Being a patient at New Hyde allows him to draw a parallel between the treatment of mad people and people of color in the United States: "This wasn't about an infraction, but dictating a philosophy of life: certain types of people must be overseen."³⁰ Pepper hadn't been forced to understand white, able-minded privilege before, but the reality of his previous entitlement comes into sharp relief as he stands at the nurse's desk at New Hyde.

Pepper's romantic involvement with Sue provides additional insight into his privilege. Sue emigrated from China with her sister as a young girl, but never gained U.S. citizenship, and her undocumented status is moving her toward forced release from the hospital to an immigration hearing. Pepper is frustrated by being powerless to help, but Sue challenges him to stop fantasizing about rescuing her: "Your dream is about what *you* want to do, not what *I* need."³¹ Sue and her friends also model an undercommons form of resistance or mad pride. Late at night, in the main room, the three women clip magazine and news articles—putting together an archive of stories about mad people. In effect, they are doing wake work,

²⁶ LaValle, *The Devil*, 92.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 142.

²⁸ LaValle, *The Devil*, 142.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 143.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, 261, italics in original.

remembering forgotten people, mad folk who have died, escaped, or done something newsworthy. Some stories feature people from New Hyde; for example, they have Kofi's obituary, and those of other former patients. Pepper calls their project a "kind of war memorial."³² (247), which captures the spirit of their labor.

Intertwined with his reckoning with madness and white racism, his relationships with Sue and Loochie challenge him to expand his limited, patriarchal notions of masculinity. Before New Hyde, Pepper saw his role with women as a protector, but Sue and Loochie push back on his misguided benevolence. They demand that he show up for them, not that he fix their lives or rescue them. A conversation between Pepper and Loochie's mother captures this tension. Pepper asks how she could have let Loochie live in a hospital for so many years, saying he would do anything for Sue—including dying for her. Loochie's mother, however, challenges that sentiment: "Men always want to die for something. For someone. I can see the appeal. You do it once and it's done...But it takes a lot of courage to live for someone, too" (342). Rather than abandoning Loochie, Pepper realizes she has done everything, painful as it has been, to keep her daughter alive. Pepper learns from and is transformed by these women; his drive to rescue them shifts to a more interdependent relationship and tenacious belief in their power and insight. Near the end of the novel, when several patients attempt an escape, he and Loochie find an actual way out, but at the moment of decision, Pepper realizes that she does not need him to protect her, so he pushes Loochie to escape on her own. Instead of running away, Pepper returns to protect the Devil from other patients in a violent struggle that brings renewed media attention to New Hyde. Ultimately, after helping to liberate Loochie and to bring public scrutiny upon the hospital, especially its treatment of the Devil /Mr. Vesserplein, Pepper begins to embrace a new role within the hospital: a willing denizen of the undercommons, one of the mad people, a friend to new arrivals, and guardian of lost histories.

Part 3: *The Changeling*: Destruction or Deliverance

LaValle's most recent novel, *The Changeling*, published in 2017, uses the horror genre to construct a mythic landscape in which two juxtaposed familial histories expose worldviews in violent opposition: one based on a warped white patriarchal ideology that sacrifices (selected) children to maintain order; the other born out of resistance—grounded in a fierce matriarchal drive to protect these targeted young lives. The novel centers around Apollo Kagwa and Emma Valentine, whose infant son Brian is stolen and replaced by a changeling—the offspring of a troll. Familiar figures in folklore, changelings are replacement creatures left by fairies, trolls, or other mythic beings as replacements for stolen human children. In many stories,

³² LaValle, *The Devil*, 247.

the changeling becomes sickly, aggressive, troublesome, even feral. Disability scholars have suggested that changeling myths may have emerged to explain the onset of disability, specifically autism. In LaValle's novel, however, the mythic becomes literal, and Apollo and Emma are forced to navigate the horrors of "one ugly fairy tale"³³ to find their infant son.

The first half of the novel traces Apollo's history, with the courtship of his parents, Brian West from Syracuse and Lillian Kagwa who emigrated from Uganda in her mid-twenties. Brian and Lillian soon marry and have a son, Apollo, but their happiness is short lived; when Apollo is four, Brian West disappears, never to be seen again. Apollo's mother, who reclaims the name Kagwa for herself and her son, raises the child on her own. Growing up, Apollo reads voraciously, becomes increasingly enamored with books, and eventually builds his own business as a rare and used book seller. Years later, his business leads him to Emma Valentine, a librarian in the Fort Washington branch of the New York Public Library. Emma impresses Apollo immediately, as she calms a distressed homeless man with kind, firm direction. Petite in stature, Emma's insight and strength are all the more striking. Within a few years, Emma and Apollo marry and welcome baby Brian into their family.

Initially, Apollo and Emma experience the excruciating joy, fatigue, and separation anxiety of most new parents, but after six months, a serious rift has emerged between them. Since returning to work—after a mere six weeks—Emma has been receiving texts from Apollo with pictures of Brian, pictures Apollo couldn't have taken. The first shot captures Apollo loading a rented van with Brian buckled into his car seat on the driveway behind his father. The image is haunting. She wonders who took it, why it was sent, but when she asks Apollo, the text and image have vanished, and they can't find the picture on Apollo's phone. The texts continue to appear and disappear, tormenting Emma; she knows someone is watching, even targeting Brian, but Apollo thinks she is delusional. The final straw is a picture of Brian in the backseat of a Zipcar that Apollo is driving, as if someone was standing at the back window of the car. "GOT HIM,"³⁴ the text reads. This text also disappears from her phone, and when she tries to convince Apollo that Brian has been stolen, he questions her sanity. She explains further that she has found other mothers online whose children have also disappeared, been replaced, but he grows furious: "On the message board? I'm so happy a bunch of stir-crazy mothers offered suggestions about fixing our family. But the answer is simple. You're what's

³³ LaValle, *The Changeling*, 259.

³⁴ LaValle, *The Changeling*, 118.

wrong with our family, Emma. You. Are. The. Problem. Go take another pill.”³⁵ Madness is hurled as an insult, a dismissal, a disavowal of Emma as Brian’s mother.

Soon after this, Emma takes desperate action, solidifying the belief that madness has pushed her over the edge. She chains Apollo to the steam pipe in the kitchen, beats him with a hammer, and kills the baby. This, at least, is what happens on the surface. However, this fatal act shifts and splits the narrative arc of the novel. Emma, having really destroyed the troll’s offspring, disappears to search for Brian; Apollo, believing the unreal, initially hunts for Emma to exact his revenge, but as he comes to understand that Brian has been offered as sacrifice, he helps Emma destroy the actual monsters in this ugly tale. Their separate paths ultimately lead them back together: Emma finds her way to the mythic monster—an actual troll holding Brian captive; Apollo, finds the troll’s human counterpart, William Wheeler, who has constructed an online platform for his own familial legacy of white racist violence, projecting horror and human sacrifice in the form of a dystopic, pay-per view reality show.

After Emma’s disappearance, newly immersed in the horror story that has become his life, Apollo unearths irreconcilable worldviews—each tied to familial lineages: William Wheeler and his Knudsen family line, contrasted to the Kagwa/Valentine line. William Wheeler insinuates himself into Apollo’s life as a rare book buyer, but he is actually lying and manipulating, hoping his search for Emma will lead Wheeler to his wife. Wheeler tells Apollo his wife, like Emma, has murdered his daughter; however, Wheeler has actually sacrificed his child to the troll, and his wife has gone into hiding to protect their other children. Apollo ultimately discovers, through Wheeler’s father, Jorgen, that the family has an historical contract with the troll: In order to protect a Norwegian sloop carrying dozens of immigrants in 1825, his ancestor, Nils Knudsen, made a pact with the monster—the sacrifice of a child for protection on the voyage. Nils sacrificed his own child, but as years passed, the Knudsen men performed their “service” to the troll by selecting other children for sacrifice. Apollo listens to this story in Jorgen’s den, where photographs of the victims are displayed: “These other boys and girls—black and brown, yellow, white, and red—a roster as varied as the general assembly of the United Nations.”³⁶ Jorgen explains that immigrants were readily available in the early years, defending the “tough choices”³⁷ made by his forefathers. When his time came to feed the monster, he would look for children “without protection,” justifying his cruelty as a process of identifying “castoffs.”³⁸

³⁵ LaValle, *The Changeling*, 119.

³⁶ LaValle, *The Changeling*, 365.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 366.

Through this metaphor of the troll, this lineage of sacrifice, LaValle lays out a settler colonial, patriarchal, white supremacist mindset that must be sustained to feed the monster. This destroyer ideology depends upon two key elements: first, the assumption that some lives are disposable, and second, that those who resist must be branded as the actual threat. The Knudsen family, in their self-preserving pact with the monster, assume power over the selection process. They accept the troll's demand for a sacrifice, and in so doing, perpetuate the ideology that their survival depends upon the death of a child. And while the images of sacrificed children represent multiple ethnicities and nationalities, Jorgen explicitly deploys white male grievance to justify marking other (non-White) people's children as disposable. Referring to the social burden his son has had to endure, Jorgen asserts an all too familiar trope, "There was a time in this country when a man like him could be sure his children would do better than he had done. Once that was the birthright of every white man in America. But not anymore. Suddenly men like my son were being passed over in the name of things like 'fairness' and 'balance.' Where's the justice in that?"³⁹ This grievance mentality too easily pits white people against people of color. As Juliet Hooker points out, white grievance promotes an understanding of social change and democratic process "as a zero-sum game in which gains by other groups are experienced as losses by the dominant group, [and in this schema] white losses become magnified while black losses are rendered invisible."⁴⁰ The Knudsens have internalized this belief system, and the troll becomes the mechanism to destroy the evidence, rendering the loss of life invisible.

While all of the Knudsen have blood on their hands, Jorgen's son, the man who stole Brian, takes the pact with the troll to a new level—into the digital, virtual age. The man Apollo comes to know as William Wheeler uses the online moniker Kinder Garten (a twisted distortion of a term meant to protect children) to sell video access of the troll. Not only does Kinder Garten exploit his family's pact with the troll to prop up his own sense of power, he also transforms kidnapping and killing of infants into an entrepreneurial enterprise. Using his technological expertise, he sets up a camera in the troll's cave and creates an online community of spectators, eager to pay handsomely to witness the sacrifice.

Crucial to the success of his monstrous start-up venture is sowing conflict, confusion, and even a sense of madness among the parents of stolen children. Through texts, posts, pictures, and then erasure of digital evidence, Kinder Garten exposes the horrible truth of the abductions to mothers, but a lie to fathers. Many mothers, like Emma, resort to killing the changeling, and go into hiding with their

³⁹ LaValle, *The Changeling*, 369.

⁴⁰ Juliet Hooker, "Black Protest/White Grievance: On the Problem of White Political Imaginations Not Shaped by Loss," 486.

children. Fathers, lacking material evidence, come to believe their spouses have postpartum depression or other diagnoses. Ultimately, like Apollo, believing their wives have become murderers, fathers are driven to their own forms of trauma and madness. Kinder Garten exploits those feelings of betrayal in men, not just in fathers, but other men who feel aggrieved, to build an online community of perverted, misogynistic wrath: “We are Kinder Garten. Ten thousand men with one name.”⁴¹

The mothers, as Emma discovers, have found one another, and in seeking the truth within an unreal landscape, in forming a community of support, they represent a collective resistance, an undercommons of refugees. Further, these women embody an opposing ideology, based on an unyielding protection of children, and resistance to cruel exploitation of the vulnerable. Before finding Emma and Jorgen, Apollo finds this community of women, who have taken up residence on an island in the East River. The leader of the community, Cal, helps him see that his rage against Emma has been misplaced. Similar to Pepper’s shifting orientation in *The Devil in Silver*, Apollo has to shift his understanding, and this “undercommons” community exposes him to the lies he has been fed by Kinder Garten. On their island refuge, Cal explains that Apollo had been tricked by a surface illusion: “The Scottish called it glamer,” Cal said. “Glamour. It’s an old kind of magic. An illusion to make something appear different than it really is.”⁴²

Indeed, his interaction with Cal and with the community shifts Apollo’s perspective, especially his single-minded rage against Emma. He spends the day watching over a young girl, Gayl, who has become attached to him. The simple acts of feeding her breakfast, of playing, of being needed, restore a sense of hope. He begins to see these women not as villains, but as unwavering, fierce protectors. Emma’s final words to him, “You don’t see, but you will,”⁴³ come back as a haunting mantra. As he begins to see the truth under the “glamer/glamour,” Cal’s explanation of their collective seems more credible:

People call us witches,” Cal said quickly. She grabbed Apollo’s hand. “But maybe what they’re really saying is that we were women who did things that seemed impossible. You remember those old stories about mothers who could lift cars when their kids were trapped underneath? I think of it like that. When you have to save the one you love, you will become someone else, something else. You will transform. The only real magic is the things we’ll do for the ones we love.”⁴⁴

⁴¹ LaValle, *The Changeling*, 277.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 314.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁴⁴ LaValle, *The Changeling*, 283.

As Apollo reorients to Cal's explanation of Emma's actions, he falls into a realm of madness—in the sense that the mythic and his heretofore accepted reality suddenly split and interchange; this is madness with disorienting and reorienting potential, its unexpected pathways exposed.

For Apollo, the new path leads to Emma, and with a fierce resolve he brings from the undercommons, from Cal's community of refugees, he comes psychologically ready to share her burden. When he finds her encamped outside the cave of the troll, she is luminous, powerful, a protective witch; however, she is also broken, frail, and wasting away. She explains this power as the magic of the ordinary, not a supernatural mystery: "I wasn't able to do it because I was so powerful, I was able to do it because I had no other choice. I had to do it alone, so I did. But now I don't have to do it alone. At least I hope I don't. We could be stronger together."⁴⁵ And they are stronger. Like the final act of Peele's *Get Out*, LaValle provides his characters a well-earned revenge. Apollo kills Jorgen, Emma kills Kinder Garten, and they burn the Knudsen house, with its legacy of murderous destruction, to the ground. Most important, they rescue Brian and destroy the troll by luring him into the sun; in this act, they destroy the pact and legacy of sacrifice.

In the destruction of Kinder Garten and the monstrous ideology he serves, LaValle suggests a necessary resistance to a lineage that preserves power through white male grievance, and a logic that constructs "outsiders" as disposable or replaceable. This ideology can be destroyed, but it also easily endures in hidden spaces because people continue to feed its voracious appetite—with prejudice and fear. The resistant worldview insists upon exposing this ideology to the light. This is also a process of peeling back the veneer of "glamer." As Apollo realizes, "The world is full of glamour, especially when it obscures the suffering of the weak."⁴⁶ The competing lineage includes those driven by justice, who direct their power toward protecting the vulnerable. As Marian Wright Edelman states, "What children need is somebody who will bite any hand that hurts them." Resisting the monsters (people, beliefs) that would sacrifice, replace, or destroy others requires determination, bite, and sustaining relationships.

On the surface, the horror genre seems a poor fit with Disability Studies—especially when looking for transgressive or complicated representations of madness and Blackness. However, in this analysis of Jordan Peele's *Get Out* with Victor LaValle's recent literary horror, we see examples of horror as social criticism. Peele and LaValle exploit and amplify the blurry boundaries of madness, insisting that seeming realities on the surface are shrouding important realities, and elements of madness must be integrated or navigated to expose the truth. Moving beyond

⁴⁵ Ibid., 415.

⁴⁶ LaValle, *The Changeling*, 384.

horror tropes that conflate disability and madness with “monstrous” bodyminds, these works use figurations of the monstrous to expose human cruelty and systems of violence, especially those supported by legacies of ableism and white racism.

While these works of horror use expected elements of the genre, by connecting characters’ immediate danger to historic inequities and systems of injustice, viewers and readers are invited to more deeply invest in the character’s survival, as well as the social transformation needed to eradicate such threats. In *Get Out*, the Armitages aren’t simply an evil, cruel family; they embody the horror of white supremacy and elitist privilege taken to its dystopic, yet logical extreme. In rooting for Chris, audience members are expelled (with him) to the “sunken place,” a representational geography akin to Moten’s and Harney’s “undercommons,” spaces haunted by white racial violence and historic oppression, but also spaces of insight and resistance. Yet even as Chris escapes, he is still enmeshed, as are we all, in the legacies of racial oppression and violence that props up the Armitage’s façade of respectability.

LaValle’s works also connect his characters’ struggles to historic inequities and destructive belief systems: the structural violence of institutions; systemic racial injustice; and toxic patriarchal power. In his novels, horror is not gratuitous or forensic violence, but a representational geography. LaValle enjoys placing characters in horrifying situations, then tracing how they might negotiate pathways through various dangers—sometimes internal, more often relational, socio-political and structural. He uses grotesque imagery and monstrous figures, but these are not reduced to disability; instead, madness and physical difference are braided into an understanding of characters and their relations with each other. In an interview, LaValle stresses that having compassion for his characters is elemental to his approach:

I always tell my writing students that you shouldn’t write about people you don’t like. By this, I mean you shouldn’t write about people if you can’t empathize with them. When I say this some folks think that means they should only write about the people they already love. But what I mean is that they should love more people.⁴⁷

LaValle’s tenderness toward characters and attention to their deepening relationships is a hallmark of his literary horror. For Peele, astonishing viewers into a transformative compassion drives his work as well. With a lens to social critique, these works of horror exploit fear, shock, and intensity to force readers and viewers into a disorienting landscape—into more complicated representational geographies of madness and Blackness. These works invite audiences to become more

⁴⁷ LaValle, quoted in Frances, 954.

invested in a “rerouting of interior beliefs,”⁴⁸ a reorientation that engages with race and madness as inseparable elements in an internal, relational struggle toward disability and racial justice.

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⁴⁸ Rankine, “The Condition,” loc 1672.

Materializing Tension: The Laborious, Woven Documentation Of a Black, Queer, Crip Bodymind in Indira Allegra's *Documented Disability*

Tamir Williams

The right not to work is the right not to have your value determined by your productivity as a worker, by your employability or salary....It is about our relation not only to labor but the significance of performing that labor, and to the idea that only through the performance of wage labor does the human being actually accrue value themselves. It is about cultivating a skeptical attitude regarding the significance of work.

-Sunaura Taylor, "The Right Not to Work"

To the viewer, the fluffy, large pillow against which they rest their back might appear to belie the difficulty of their performance and the labor in generating their woven document. Sitting uncomfortably upright in their bed, they work to produce a warp with silk threads whose ends are secured between their lower teeth and tied to a wooden warping paddle that they tightly cradle between their thighs. (see Fig. 1.1)¹ The tension between the paddle and their mouth is thus achieved through a consistent straining or *warping* of their own body: locked thighs, tilted head, and hunched shoulders. It is this straining—this *labor* of holding tension—that enables them to weave. Over the course of an eight-hour filmed performance, they work to produce a woven account of their labor value and their social navigation as a queer person of color living with an invisible disability. Each word of this account is slowly and laboriously enunciated, as they simultaneously work to insert thin strips of paper (the weft) between the shed of their oral loom using a shuttle (see Fig. 1.2).² Though barely discernible in the performance—as listening and reading are not the modes of engagement that they wish the viewer to have with their document (see Fig. 1.3)—the transcript for the testimony held in the woven document reads:

I extend my thanks to Susan Burch who aided me in thinking through my initial ideas for this piece. I am also immensely grateful to Willa Beckman for her time and caring criticism during revision. Lastly, I am deeply thankful to Indira Allegra for allowing me the opportunity to speak openly with them about their artistic practice.

¹ In weaving, the "warp" is a set of vertical thread that is held in tension on a looming device. The warp is necessary in order to weave.

² The "weft" is the horizontal thread that interlaces the warp threads. The "shuttle" is a device designed to hold and pass the weft thread back and forth between the warp threads or the "shed."

I have a disability. Because I have a disability you cannot see, I have to prove that I deserve to have the right to [tell] you the level of production I can offer to society without being stigmatized for it. Today I stayed home. Whatever I could not accomplish in bed was not accomplished today. I have the right to be believed even though you cannot see my disability.³

Contemporary textile and performance artist Indira Allegra works with “tension as creative material” to explore issues of the bodymind,⁴ disability, institutional violence, and (bodily) memory.⁵ Allegra's pieces *Documenting Disability* (2013) and *Documented Disability* (2013) are an eight-minute-long, triptych video documentation of their bed-bound performance, and the woven account produced from that performance, respectively. Each was exhibited in the “Creative Labor: Queer-It-Yourself (QIY)” show at the San Francisco SOMArts Cultural Center in 2016. The video work does not present a linear visual progression of them weaving the document; rather, the film confounds the process. Examining the three asynchronous shots, the viewer constantly oscillates between different points in the document's creation. Arguably, Allegra creates a “cripping” of this craft practice.⁶ As the three videos loop, the viewer witnesses Allegra's radical self-assertation of the value of their labor capacities, which deviate from neoliberal capitalist definitions of “productive.” By turning to the Western, traditionally femme labor of weaving to enact this radical documentation, Allegra calls our attention to the ways in which the labor capacities and labor values of certain bodies have always been brought into question. The labor of this craft process is akin to the labor of making the needs of their Black, queer, invisibly disabled/crip bodymind believable within the U.S. neoliberal capitalist system.

³ *Documenting Disability*, Indira Allegra, 2013. Transcript.

⁴ Put forth by Disability Studies scholar Margaret Price, “bodymind” is a concept that emphasizes the inextricability and interdependence of the body and mind.

⁵ Allegra, “Bio/CV.”

⁶ I contend that the nonlinear, back and forth passage of time in the video, as well as the slow time taken to complete the woven document in the performance, can be read as “crip time.” Ellen Samuels defines “crip” time as time travelling that all disabled/crip bodyminds experience. She writes: “Disability and illness have the power to extract us from linear, progressive time with its normative life stages and cast us into a wormhole of backward and forward acceleration, jerky stops and starts, tedious intervals and abrupt endings. Some of us contend with the impairments of old age while still young; some of us are treated like children no matter how old we get. The medical language of illness tries to reimpose the linear, speaking in terms of the chronic, the progressive, and the terminal, of relapses and stages. But we who occupy the bodies of crip time know that we are never linear” (Samuels par. 5). Moreover, the slow, crip time that Allegra employs in creating the woven document also disrupts neoliberal capitalist constructions of labor and time, specifically the concept and practice of punctuality. Allegra also cripps the practice of weaving itself through the misuse of the wooden warping paddle; They manipulate it to serve the pursuit of their performance. Crip/disabled folx constantly bend things and time to serve their needs.

Bodyminds are assigned values that equate to their levels of productivity under neoliberal capitalism. Enmeshed in this institutional power structure, disability documentation in the United States thus works to simultaneously legitimize and justify the labor capacities and value of bodyminds that deviate from “normative” levels of productivity. This is particularly true with regard to cases concerning access to accommodation and government aid. Allegra’s *Documenting Disability* and *Documented Disability* provide a radical reflection point against traditional modes of producing the documentation needed to substantiate disability claims around labor capacities and labor values. Central to this radicalization is Allegra’s reconsideration of the overreliance on the alphanumeric written word in producing such documentation; they remain insistent upon which words are articulated and which are refused in their performed, woven account. This is most aptly seen, for example, in the exclusion of both the word “diagnosis” and the commonly used phrase “I am diagnosed with.” Both are typically employed in medical and narrative documentation to articulate the existence of a disabled/crip bodymind. Alternatively, Allegra simply states in their document, “I have a disability.”⁷ This refusal to name their diagnosis and/or describe its corresponding symptomatology consequently becomes a methodological tool through which their radical documentation is realized. Moreover, this refusal gives them authorship over the narrative of their bodymind, since an official diagnosis is something that others typically provide. Through weaving, Allegra moves closer to a form of documentation that accurately captures the complex experiences of their disabled/crip, queer bodymind—experiences that are “too large for...language to hold.”⁸ Weaving allows Allegra to write with and materialize the tensions that constitute their lived experience.

In what follows, I first examine Allegra’s turn to “tension as creative material,”⁹ as reflective of what I term: “a tensional model of disability.” This tensional model is strongly influenced by feminist crip theorist Alison Kafer’s crip political/relational model of disability, wherein disability is recognized as a site for potential political coalitions and is in constant relation to other bodyminds, institutions, and environments. My approach differs, however, in the sense that it emphasizes the materialization of the *felt* reality of these politicized relations.¹⁰ With *Documented Disability*, Allegra materializes the experience of their multiple minoritized social

⁷ *Documenting Disability*.

⁸ Allegra, Personal Interview, Oct. 23, 2018.

⁹ Allegra, “Bio/CV.”

¹⁰ By “*felt* reality,” I mean to refer to the affective dimensions of the crip bodymind experience. This is inspired by Jeanne Vaccaro’s discussion of “felt matter” regarding the craft practices of trans artists.

positionalities through weaving: Functioning like figurative warp and weft, these identities stretch, strain, and interlace with each other and with external tensions.

Second, I launch into a close visual analysis of *Documented Disability* through this tensional model, considering two radical re-approaches to disability documentation that Allegra enacts: 1) a nonperformance of believability or, as Robert McRuer terms it, a refusal of “coming out crip”¹¹; 2) a reconfiguration of the doctor-patient paradigm, whereas the power to diagnose and vouch for their disabled/crip bodymind is removed from the medical professional and medical document. In their handwoven document, Allegra alternatively embeds the proof needed to verify the labor capacity of their bodymind. In doing so, they insist that the “hand-made” is the only means of accessing non-institutionally mediated documentation of their bodymind experience. Stated another way, words, as Katherine Ott reminds us, “convey meaning but do not embody it...[only] objects [can] provide a direct experience.”¹² Thus, while Allegra states in the video that they will tell us their labor capacity, the woven document, as I argue, emphasizes an affective showing. Whereas the medical professional and medical document promise to tell us “what it is” and “what to do about it,” Allegra’s woven record *shows* us how it *feels*.

Like Allegra, I work to navigate the limitations and harm that words frequently cause within institutional/medical documentation of disability through a methodology of refusal. Throughout this essay, I continually refuse to turn to words and phrases such as “diagnosis” or “Allegra is diagnosed with.” Instead, I attune myself to what is materialized and felt in their dimensional woven record, rather than seek to read definitive or precise descriptions of their condition.¹³ I employ words to help explain these materializations, but these descriptions do not embody the palpable reality of their social circumstances. Like Allegra, I insist that we always turn to the material substance itself to understand disabled/crip bodyminds. To merely name Allegra’s diagnosis and its corresponding symptomatology does not move us any closer to the direct experience of their bodymind. Instead, we must recognize the harmful limitations loaded on traditional medical documents.

In its essence, this essay functions as a meditation on the radical reworkings that often arise from shifting our attention to the tensional-political relations between 1) disabled/crip persons and things (e.g., objects; ideologies) and, 2) things and things. The latter reflects the way in which this tensional-political model of

¹¹ Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*, 34.

¹² Katherine Ott, “Disability Things: Material Culture and American Disability History, 1700–2010,” 122.

¹³ My refusal to use “diagnosis” or “diagnosed with” is aligned with the desire to not remove narrative authority from Allegra. Moreover, I acknowledge that providing a precise description of their condition is impossible as it may always be changing.

disability can be mapped onto the interdisciplinary academic conversations that I wish to evoke around race, queerness, and disability. Situating this project as a tensional exchange or coalitional reimagining between material culture studies, art history, performance studies, economic theory, and Black Disability Studies, I consider this essay a materialization of the *warp*ed interactions between these scholarly threads.

Towards a Tensional Model of Disability

As someone who embodies multiple marginalized positions, I cannot imagine a life without tension for myself.

-Indira Allegra, "Personal Interview"

The tensional model of disability that I locate in *Documented Disability* builds upon multiple preceding paradigms of disability. For the purposes of this essay, I will focus on the frameworks of three distinct models through which disability is constructed, analyzed, and experienced: the medical, the social, and the political/relational.

The medical model posits that disability is a physical or mental impairment caused by a biomedical defect or condition that is intrinsic to a person's body-mind. Such impairments are thought to decrease the "afflicted" person's quality of life and ultimately render their future barren.¹⁴ Since most conceive of disability exclusively as a personal medical problem within this paradigm, medical officials ardently recommend a "cure" or intervention, or, under some circumstances, they impose interventions on a disabled person as an involuntary means by which they (re)obtain "normalcy" or a normative standard of living.¹⁵ Moreover, medical intervention works to increase a disabled person's ability to participate as a laborer in a neoliberal capitalist society, since a bodymind that requires significant accommodations is of little labor value in a competitive labor market. Thus, the achievement of able-bodiedness/ able-mindedness through medical intervention becomes both a means of "improving" quality of life and of meeting capitalism's expectations around labor capacities. However, the medical model neither considers, nor critically engages the *external* factors that impact a disabled person's quality of life and labor value. With the rise of Disability Studies and the Disability Rights Movement, addressing unaccommodating systemic structures that produce disablement became a central focus for many disabled people, (disabled) activists, and (disabled) scholars, which the *social model of disability* subsequently articulated.

¹⁴ Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*.

¹⁵ Kafer, *Ibid.*, 5.

Rather than define disability as an inherent individual condition, the social model establishes a distinction between individual impairment and socially produced disability. Impairment comes to signify a physical, emotional, or neurological condition of a person—whether temporary or permanent, congenital, or acquired.¹⁶ Contrarily, disability or disablement stems from constricted access to societal infrastructure (e.g., public transportation and buildings) and institutional systems (e.g., independent housing, healthcare, jobs, and cultural systems/ideologies). But it is important to note that a neoliberal capitalist system necessitates such unaccommodating structures. In other words, one is impaired because of a physical or mental medical condition, but one becomes disabled through a competitive capitalist system that is built solely to accommodate an able-bodied/minded laborer. Thus, the social model offers up disability as a social site for political action because, according to Kafer, “the problem of disability [moves beyond the bodymind and] is located in inaccessible buildings, discriminatory minds, and ideological systems.”¹⁷ A social approach to addressing disability would not necessarily include treating a medical condition of the bodymind, but politically transforming a disabling systemic paradigm (i.e., neoliberal capitalism). Kafer transfers the political nature of the social approach to disability to her subsequent model: the political/relational.

One of the central departures that Kafer's political/relational approach makes from the earlier paradigms is the rigid binary of disabled/nondisabled;¹⁸ this binary prevents exploration into the ways in which “compulsory able-bodiedness/mindedness” or, generally, pathologized non-normativity can affect people without impairments (e.g., Black, queer persons).¹⁹ This speaks to the relational aspect of this model and aligns the political/relational model with a *crip* theoretical critique of disability.

Many people in the disability community have reclaimed and utilized intra-communally the term “crip,” a shortening of the historically pejorative term “cripple,” to refer to other persons with disabilities, nondisabled allies, disability art, and intellectual culture. “Crip theory,” as coined by Robert McRuer, is a theoretical meditation on the ways in which one's other social positionalities (e.g., Black, nonbinary, queer) influence their lived experiences with disabilities. McRuer locates “compulsory able-bodiedness/mindness” as the capitalist paradigm that links all minoritized social positionalities. Thus, the ability of a nondisabled per-

¹⁶ By acquired disability, I mean to refer to a disability that developed as a result of an accident, or chronic or acute illness.

¹⁷ Kafer, 6.

¹⁸ Sami Schalk, “Coming to Claim Crip: Disidentification with/in Disability Studies,” 17.

¹⁹ McRuer, Robert, *Crip Theory*, 2; Kafer, Alison. *Feminist. Queer*, 8.

son to claim identification *with* *crip*, as opposed to an appropriative identification *as* *crip*, becomes a central possibility within a *crip* critique of disability.²⁰ Regarding this distinction, Sami Schalk notes that “to identify *with*...is to personally and politically align oneself with a group one may or may not belong to, but with which one feels a positive connection” under the struggle against neoliberal capitalism.²¹ McRuer, Kafer, and Schalk remind us that disability is not experienced in isolation to one’s other social positionalities, or to other bodyminds and things. Rather disability engenders relationships, “potential site[s] for collective reimagining,” and “crip affiliations.”²² Allegra’s woven document materializes the relational realities between their own social positionalities. This process is reflective of what I term a “tensional model of disability.”

A tensional model of disability insists upon the prioritization of the *material* in the articulation of disabled/*crip* experience; it insists upon the material manifestations of the tensions that arise inside and outside of a disabled/*crip* bodymind. In this way, the tensional model of disability is a useful aesthetic framework for analyzing the work of multi-marginalized, disabled/*crip* artists like Allegra, who seek to generate work that provides a “direct and literal experience” of their bodyminds and social circumstances.²³

Allegra conceives of their weaving practice as the interlacing of the tensions that both comprise and act upon them.²⁴ By possessing their own entangled minoritized positionalities—Black, queer, and invisibly disabled—Allegra has developed a “fluency” or “hyper-literacy” to the palpability of internally entwined tensions and of the external, patterned, structural tensions that also act upon their bodymind.²⁵ In a recent interview, Allegra discusses their awareness of these internal and external tensions through an account of their visit to a hospital for a sporadic event of illness:

When I arrived at the hospital last year for my first surgery, I felt a dense-heavy twist in my stomach when the man at the counter could not—for a moment—determine if my insurance was actually in-network. So suddenly, a primary tension was created between my need for care and the hospital’s desire to guarantee payment in a society where

²⁰ McRuer; Schalk.

²¹ Schalk, 15.

²² Kafer 9.

²³ Ott, 122.

²⁴ Allegra, Personal Interview, 2018a.

²⁵ Allegra, “In Conversation with Indira Allegra,” 2017.

people who cannot pay often do not receive the treatment they need. A secondary tension arose for me surrounding my fear of being abandoned emotionally by white members of my care team due to longstanding histories of racism and racist abuse of Black and Native women by the medical industrial complex. Then a third tension developed—would the presence of my genderqueer partner be respected as my family member in this setting? The receptionist was looking us both over, asking again if my partner should be considered family to me. In each of these cases, the experience of being pulled between forces—between my needs and boundaries and the hospital's needs and boundaries—had a real impact on my body. These were tensions felt also by my partner standing next to me at the counter. The tension in the room was undeniable and palpable. For me, as a queer [person] of color and as a low-income person, this palpability of tension is something I encounter multiple times a day on a daily basis.²⁶

Documented Disability emerges, firstly, as the material consequences between Allegra's threadlike identities: Their invisible disability, Blackness, and queerness rub up against each other, creating interwoven tensions. Secondly, as witnessed in the account of their hospital visit, the piece speaks to the ways in which these tensional weavings of their identity are reactive to outside pressures from institutions (e.g., the medical industrial complex), paradigms (e.g., politics of believability and heteronormativity), and other bodyminds (e.g., Allegra's partner). By extending Kafer's assessment interventions to *Documented Disability*, I contend that the piece enables a crip recognition of the non-normativity or able-bodiedness/able-mindedness projected onto a subject's other minoritized positionalities. Thus, Allegra encourages an analysis of the ways in which Blackness, queerness, and disability are all entangled in the struggle against the *tensions* of compulsory able-bodiedness/able-mindedness and normativity. But to analyze *Documented Disability* solely through Kafer's political/relational model does not account for the attention Allegra pays to the palpability of these internal and external tensional encounters. In *Documented Disability*, Allegra's turn to weaving and cloth as radical modalities for performing time-based documentation and generating material documents, respectively, permits them to tend to the *felt* nature of their social circumstances. Traditional written, disembodied approaches to disclosing and/or documenting one's experiences of disability fail to account for this constant stretching, warping, pulling, shifting, and straining of their bodymind internally and externally.

²⁶ "Allegra, In Conversation."

A Nonperformance of Believability and Refusal of “Coming Out [Invisibly] Crip”

I need not waste a moment trying to prove certain aspects of my everyday life...What I can do is explore the representation of those realities on my own terms...

-Indira Allegra, qtd. in “Indira Allegra: In Conversation with Sarah Biscarra Dilley”

An official medical diagnosis assumes a politicized power because it purports to be the sole articulation of disability that is required to navigate the tensional interactions with systemic structures (e.g., hospitals, insurance companies). However, even an official diagnosis can never completely guarantee the believability of one’s status as disabled. A clear example of this can be seen in the meticulous process for obtaining Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) or Supplemental Security Income (SSI): The initial submission of required medical documentation is, then, typically followed by a labor capacity assessment (i.e., the “Physical Residual Functional Capacity Assessment” form), which is administered by the disability specialist of one’s respective state governmental agency.²⁷ This additive component underscores the lack of clarity around who truly decides whether a person is disabled and, arguably, the instability of the nondisabled/disabled binary. The claimant is continuously reminded that they will never have the agency to make a self-proclamation about their labor capacity.

Thus, disclosure of a disabled person’s official diagnosis to outside forces is never a finite step in the articulation of one’s status as disabled. Instead, officials quickly engage in harsh scrutiny of the disabled claimant’s bodymind in order to determine whether the person can aptly perform the correct and *visible* signifiers or symptoms that correspond to the individual’s revealed condition. This process represents the performative labor of making oneself into a believable claimant. Carrie Sandahl and McRuer aptly describe this labor as the autobiographical, performative process of “coming out as crip.”

Based on the queer self-exposure act of “coming out of the closet,” this performative crip act remains in tension with what Rosemarie Garland Thomson terms “stigma management,”²⁸ the laborious practice of “hiding or minimizing the appearance and impact of impairment” in an “effort to put the nondisabled at ease.”²⁹

²⁷ United States, Social Security Administration. “Disability Benefits,” 6.

²⁸ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson qtd. in Carrie Sandahl “Queering the Crip or Crippling the Queer? Intersections of Queer and Crip Identities in Solo Autobiographical Performance,” 40.

²⁹ Carrie Sandahl, “Queering the Crip or Crippling the Queer?” 40.

As with heteronormativity, disabled people acknowledge the implicit and explicit pressures (or tensions) from the nondisabled to perform some facets of able-bodiedness/able-mindedness.³⁰ When such performances of feigned able-bodiedness/able-mindedness are impossible, the disabled performer places a hyper-focus on their impairment in an attempt to appeal to the sympathies of the nondisabled.³¹ These become the two main representational options of disability in this type of crip performance: "one's impairment as absolutely impeding (charity case) or relatively inconsequential (overcomer)."³² However, even in "coming out as crip" performances that operate outside the boundaries of "stigma management," many disabled performers, are still centrally concerned with the affective responses of nondisabled spectators. Emotions, too, are relational. The compassion that the disabled performer evokes from the nondisabled spectator shares proximity with the pity elicited in response to the "charity case" trope.³³

The performative labor of "coming out as crip" and of "stigma management" become even more unstable, as Allegra reminds us in *Documented Disability*, especially in cases where a person's disability is invisible. How is this performance of "coming out" mapped differently onto the invisibly disabled bodymind? In what ways is the power of the medical document heightened in a performance of this kind? How can the refusal to use the written medical document, as a methodological tool, offset the power imbalances formed between the medical diagnosis, the performer, and the spectator in a performance of "coming out as [invisibly] crip"?

Invisibly disabled persons are not pressured to perform the labor of "stigma management" (in order to minimize the *felt* or emotional effect of their disability on the nondisabled) in the same way as their visibly disabled kin; typically, they easily and/or approximately pass as nondisabled, and they consequently do not have to employ a performance of the "overcomer." On the other hand, invisible mental and/or corporeal disabilities make it difficult for disabled persons to display physically and ostentatiously their adherence to the symptomatology of their conditions in cases where they desire the "charity case" trope as a means to systemic access. There are no "knowable fact[s] of the body" that can be easily rendered in a visible format.³⁴ This is the dilemma that Allegra encounters in their own social circumstances as an invisibly disabled, queer person of color who cannot adhere to

³⁰ Sanhdal, 42.

³¹ Sanhdal, "Queering the Crip."

³² Sahndal, "Queering the Crip." 41.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Kafer, 4.

“normative” labor capacities defined by capitalism. If a person cannot meet these “normative” work standards, then they are forced to perform the labor of justifying the reason for their noncompliance and their need for accommodations. As an invisibly disabled/crip person, Allegra’s labor of crafting a believable “charity case” performance, however, is intensified and requires constant repetition. Relief from the labor of “coming out as [invisibly] crip” cannot be obtained by their simply referencing their official medical diagnosis in all ableist interactions (tensions). As with the SSI and SSDI application example, disclosure often subsequently demands a performance of *visible* symptomatology. Allegra is aware of the inescapability of this performative dilemma and decides to employ refusal as a tool to elude such ableist performative demands.

This methodological refusal is exemplified in the first sentence of the video work: “I have a disability.”³⁵ Immediately, Allegra asserts their refusal to submit to the harmful performative imperatives pushed onto their bodymind by their medical diagnosis. This evasion of the medical diagnosis’ demands is achieved on a linguistic level: when speaking about their condition, Allegra nearly always uses declarative sentences rather than descriptive language. They understand that descriptive language is a form of linguistic performance. Through this linguistic maneuvering, Allegra creates, as I term it, a “nonperformance of believability” or a refusal to come out as invisibly crip. It is nonperformance in the sense that they do not fulfill the promise to perform the tropes of either the “charity case” or “overcomer.”³⁶ Instead, through the labor of this nonperformance, Allegra alerts us to the ways in which most of their relationships with external entities are governed by ableist desires to see them perform to certain capacities as a way of proving their disability.

In the section that follows, I analyze the ways in which such ableist performative demands are present in the hypothetical relational pairing between Allegra’s woven document/ performance and the SSDI “Physical Residual Functional Capacity Assessment” form; I purposefully turn to this bodymind-thing relational pairing in order to explore how ableism is materialized under this tensional model of disability. It works to call our attention to the violence embedded in the power of such institutional/medical documents.

³⁵ *Documenting Disability*, 2013.

³⁶ Sahndal, “Queering the Crip.”

“Applications Have Worked Me Out”³⁷

I..[wanted to]...focus on my own desire to create a woven document through the act of speaking and not to worry about whether the performance would be compelling enough in any way for another person. Not have to be concerned with if the particular audience would understand me in that moment. To do this in a place where I spend a lot of time when dealing with the symptoms of [REDACTED] which is my bed. So [I was] really trying to imagine an articulation of agency that was on my own terms where I could speak for myself by myself.

-Indira Allegra, “Personal Interview”

Prior to serving in their current full-time practice as an interdisciplinary artist, Allegra worked as an American Sign Language interpreter for several years.³⁸ After developing symptoms that made it difficult for them to listen effectively and translate spoken dialogue at the pace expected for live interpretation, Allegra resolved to leave this area of work.³⁹ In seeking alternative modes of work, most often as an arts educator at residency programs and secondary fine arts institutions, Allegra began to note the difficulty and exhaustion they experienced after repeatedly having to provide medical documentation of their disability in order to receive needed accommodations.⁴⁰ It was through the suggestion of a close friend that they arrived at Sunaura Taylor’s disability manifesto “The Right Not to Work” (2000).⁴¹ Finding similarities between their own experience and those of Taylor’s, especially with regard to the politics of proof and the labor value placed on disabled/crip creative folk, Allegra began to imagine alternative ways of providing applications and documents for accommodations and assistance. “Applications have worked me out,” they explain in an interview.⁴² “And I [started] thinking [about] how nice it would be to request accommodations...based just on what you know about yourself.”⁴³ Allegra manifests this utopian reimagining through the creation of *Documented Disability*.

Documented Disability can be applied to any ableist external entity that Allegra may have encountered in the past, and which they continue to encounter while navigating social and institutional structures as a Black, queer, crip creative labor-

³⁷ Allegra, Interview, 2018a.

³⁸ Allegra, Ibid., 2018a.

³⁹ Allegra, Interview, 2018b.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 2018a.

⁴¹ Ibid., 2018b.

⁴² Ibid., 2018a.

⁴³ Ibid., 2018a.

er. Given that the piece concerns issues of believability around labor capacity and takes inspiration from Taylor's manifesto on the rights of crip/disabled creative folk to government financial assistance, my turn to a common labor assessment form within the SSDI application process seems justified.

A crucial component within the guidelines and procedures for applying for SSDI is the submission of the "Physical Residual Functional Capacity Assessment" (RFC) form, which is also referred to as the "Ability to Do Work Related Activity" assessment. This form, which an applicant's primary physician must complete, is intended to describe the effect that one's impairment has on one's ability to perform labor in a work environment. Medical officials place much importance on this form because the Social Security Administration (SSA) does not grant government income assistance to disabled persons on the basis of a medical diagnosis alone. The SSA grants approval through what they deem to be a believable "charity case" performance of one's inability to complete work-related tasks deemed necessary for obtaining and retaining gainful employment.

Documented Disability addresses the RFC; this is due largely to the fact that Allegra critiques the means by which systemic structures determine one's ability to perform labor-related activities in order to receive required resources. By interpreting their declarative testimony as the material consequence of the tension between themselves and SSDI forms, Allegra, as I contend, continues to examine the incapacity of such forms to embody the material reality of their bodymind experience.

I read Allegra's arduous performance in *Documenting Disability* as a radical reimagining of what it means to fill out extensive forms, check boxes, and provide additional commentary on a labor assessment for SSDI benefits. They firmly declare in the piece, "I deserve to have the right to [tell] you the level of production I can offer to society without being stigmatized for it."⁴⁴ To begin thinking through the significance of this statement in relation to the labor of their weaving requires a recognition of the innate performative nature found in all craft practices. As curator Valerie Cassel Oliver writes on craft's performative quality: "Craft is inextricably linked to performance. As a genre predicated upon a process, it requires the doer or practitioner to undertake a series of tasks in the creation of an object."⁴⁵ Allegra similarly remarks on the topic: "Craft is fundamentally grounded in performance. If it wasn't for the repetitive and durational activity of the maker, the object would not exist."⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Allegra, *Documenting Disability*.

⁴⁵ Valerie Cassel Oliver, "Craft Out of Action," 11.

⁴⁶ Allegra, "Interview," 2018a.

Thus, to interpret Allegra's weaving in *Documenting Disability* as performance allows for a reading of this eight-hour long activity as a radical completion of a labor assessment. In the piece, the movement of their body addresses the checkbox questions found on the "Physical Residual Functional Capacity Assessment" form concerning, for example, the capacity of their cripp/disabled bodymind to balance, crouch, kneel, and lift objects of various weight. Their weaving, however, should not be viewed as a "charity case" or "overcomer" performance. Allegra is not interested in providing a moving descriptive performance of their impairment that would achieve believability around their limited labor capacities. As they state, "I...[wanted]... not to worry about whether the performance would be compelling enough in any way for another person."⁴⁷ Instead, they push for acknowledgment and appreciation of the various types of labor performed by disabled/cripp bodyminds that fall outside the list of acceptable and honorable employment (e.g., crafts). In this way, they call our attention to the larger ableist labor ideologies and tensions that exist between our neoliberal capitalist economic system and artistic laborers. Only by focusing on the material manifestation of these palpable tensions (i.e., the woven document) are we able to obtain a literal sense of these multi-tier relations that are interlaced in the fabric.

"Cloth as the Original Hard Drive": Handmade Disability Documentation

The institutional, economic, psychological and physical harm that black... [queer and disabled] people have experienced in this country (and in many other places) does not require another word of proof.

-Indira Allegra, qtd. in "Indira Allegra: In Conversation With Sarah Biscarra Dilley"

Literally, the document itself becomes the witness.

-Indira Allegra, "Personal Interview"

The video camera in *Documenting Disability* (2013) is initially read as the witness to Allegra's craft performance. However, Allegra clarifies in an interview that the true beholder of their performance is the woven document.⁴⁸ In turn, this completely disrupts our understanding of the medium that is traditionally associated with the task of documenting a live performance. How does the woven cloth bear witness to the speech-act that is their testimony? And what is the significance of this labor—the labor of witnessing? What new type of engagement with disability narratives does Allegra seek to foster by choosing to have the cloth stand in as their medical record?

⁴⁷ Ibid., 2018b.

⁴⁸ Allegra, "Interview," 2018a.

Documenting Disability creates an *embodied* counter-narrative to the medical model's demand for disembodied written documentation. This is seen clearly in Allegra's construction of an oral loom to generate a bodily document that mimics their lived corporeal reality: "I...[wanted to]...focus on my own desire to create a woven document through the act of speaking."⁴⁹ To weave or write with tension alludes to Lisa Diedrich's question concerning the need for a radical articulation of the experience of illness/disability: "[How do we tell narratives] not only *about* the body but *through* the body?"⁵⁰ Similar to Ott's skepticism around the use of words to articulate corporeal experience, Diedrich, too, desires a form of communication that is grounded in and generated through the body (the material). Allegra's turn to tension as creative material is a practice of writing about their bodymind *through* their bodymind.

By weaving with and through tension, Allegra attempts to bring their Black, queer, disabled bodymind closer to language without threatening the complexity of its experience in the process of this materialization.⁵¹ In thinking of "cloth as an external hard drive,"⁵² Allegra accesses a way of allowing other palpable or *felt* realities (e.g., Blackness and queerness), which act upon their bodymind, to always spill out into this materialization. The tension between the cloth and Allegra is supportive rather than frictional. As a witness, it absorbs and holds space for the wholeness of their experience. Through the metaphoric image of the cloth as a storage device, Allegra: 1) draws our attention again to the applicability of the tensional model of disability to relationships between human beings and things; and 2) posits that the reality of their social circumstances can be realized only through the *handmade* thing. This emphasis on the handmade—alongside the witnessing and support that the cloth performs—works to address the larger question of *Documented Disability*: What is our society's attitude towards the performance of certain types of disabled/crip labor? How much value is placed on the creative labor of a disabled/crip bodymind?⁵³

The handmade connotes a particular message about one's relationship to labor. Performance and Trans Studies scholar Jeanne Vaccaro writes on the handmade: "The labor of... [articulating crip] identity is handmade: collective made with and across bodies, objects, and forces of power a process; unfinished yet enough.... freeform. The handmade is a haptic, affective theorization of the... [crip bodymind]...a mode of animating material experience and accumulative felt

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Diedrich, *Treatments: Language, Politics, and the Culture of Illness*, 116.

⁵¹ Ibid., 160.

⁵² Ibid., 2018a.

⁵³ Sunny Taylor, "The Right Not to Work."

matter.”⁵⁴ The inherent dynamism in a woven cloth—warp and weft—is reflective of the dynamism that occurs within the tensional model of disability: Interlacings and tensions emerge across bodyminds, things, and institutional structures. Moreover, Vaccaro's claim that the “labor of...[articulating crip] identity is handmade”⁵⁵ gets at the heart of Allegra's critique regarding traditional modalities of capturing and qualifying narratives of disability (e.g., medical diagnosis; “Physical Residual Functional Capacity Assessment”; “coming out as crip” performances): They require ableist performances of labor that reveal nothing about the *felt* experience of disability. The weaving, then, is a form of handmade labor that acts as an intervention against demands to perform an ableist, “coming out as [invisibly] crip” narrative. Neither a “charity case” nor an “overcomer,” Allegra weaves their narrative at their own crip pace. Removing the medical professional as a beholder and the medical document as a voucher, Allegra makes the cloth their witness; in doing so, they elude the performance of symptomatology that the medical diagnosis demands. *Documented Disability* asserts the importance of communicating the *felt* dimensions of one's crip bodymind experience and posits that the handmade allows one to show how that experience *feels*.

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⁵⁴ Jeanne Vaccaro, “Handmade,” 96.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 96.

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Fig. 1.1 *Documenting Disability* (excerpt). Three Channel Installation. 2:28
USA English (Excerpt). Video still. 2013. Courtesy of artist.



Figure 1.2 *Documented Disability*. Oral loom woven paper, waxed silk, saliva, spoken manifesto inspired by Sunuara Taylor's *The Right Not to Work*. 13.5 x 2.75 .12 inches. 2013. Courtesy of artist.



Figure 1.3 *Documented Disability*. Oral loom woven paper, waxed silk, saliva, spoken manifesto inspired by Sunuara Taylor's *The Right Not to Work*. 13.5 x 2.75 .12 inches. 2013. Courtesy of artist.

Black Disability Gone Viral: A Critical Race Approach to Inspiration Porn

Sami Schalk

On May 31, 2018, tattoo artist Milton Purnell of Tattoo Supreme in Raleigh, North Carolina posted a striking video on his Instagram and Facebook pages. The video shows Purnell presenting Michael Mack, Jr., a ten-year-old Black boy amputee, with a new prosthetic leg.¹ The leg features custom airbrush artwork, with white and silver flames around the name and image of the Black Panther, the Marvel superhero from the blockbuster film, *Black Panther* (2018). The video captures young Mack's eyes growing wide with excitement, as Purnell shows him the prosthetic, asking the boy what he thinks of it. Suddenly, Mack's jaw drops. He spins off the stool he is seated on and hops away briefly, with his hand over his mouth. He then returns to his seat, where he grasps the leg in his hands, admiring it. In the background, two voices, including Mack's mother, Sandra McNeill, express awe and admiration for the custom artwork. In front of the camera, Purnell encourages Mack to try it on, stating "Put yo leg on man! Put yo leg on!" In the background, we hear McNeill saying that she forgot the "connecting part" for the new leg, but that Mack should still put it on for a picture. Mack puts on the prosthetic, stands up, and starts to dance. Within days, this video went viral, with hundreds of thousands of views, shares, likes, and comments across multiple social media platforms.

Whenever a video, image, or story of a disabled person goes viral, it most often occurs within the context of *inspiration porn*, a term popularized by the late Australian disability rights activist Stella Young.² Generally, inspiration porn refers to representations that "objectify disabled people for the benefit of non-disabled people."³ The term, which has taken strong hold within disability and activist communities, is beginning to appear in academic scholarship, and was even featured in an episode of the ABC sitcom *Speechless* in 2017. Inspiration porn has strong similarities to the older concept of *supercrip*, a term used to describe narratives about

¹ Purnell, Milton. "Lil Mikey Love the Art on His New Leg"; @tattoosupreme4331 "#Tattoosupreme #Suprize #Mikey #Prosthetic Leg."

² Although the term *inspiration porn* is generally attributed to Young, Kathy Gagliardi writes that "Anecdotal evidence from Lisa Harris, a disability consultant and advocate with over 20 years' disability education experience, suggests that the term was blogged about as far back as 2006 on Rachel Cohen-Rottenberg's Webpage *Disability and Representation*."

³ Stella Young, "I'm Not Your Inspiration, Thank You Very Much."

disabled people who are represented as inspiring or extraordinary for performing both mundane and exceptional activities.

Inspiration porn and supercrip narratives are similar in several ways. Both concepts rely on certain affective registers, such as inspiration, awe, tragedy, triumph, and pity; they also presume a non-disabled audience and engage ableist concepts, such as overcoming or compensating for the perceived obstacle caused by disability. They are also both narrative frameworks.⁴ That is, the people represented in these images and stories are not themselves supercrips nor inspiration porn, but rather supercrip and inspiration porn frameworks are applied to represent people and their stories in this way. There are a few differences between inspiration porn and supercrip narratives, however. The main difference is that inspiration porn often includes representations of non-disabled people “helping” disabled people, an approach not typically considered part of supercrip narratives. Inspiration porn is also used primarily in reference to memes, photos, videos, and news stories that are shared on the internet, whereas the term supercrip has most often been applied to news stories and fictional representations.

Scholarly work on inspiration porn and supercrip narratives lacks engagement with race. In most cases, scholars never mention race and the objects of analysis represent white or non-racially identified subjects. With a few exceptions, scholars do allude to race, such as in Russell Meeuf’s footnote acknowledging that his analysis of John Wayne as supercrip is specifically focused on white masculinity and my argument that Christopher Reeve’s racial and class privilege is often overlooked in representations of him as supercrip.⁵ In both cases, racial privilege is acknowledged as a constitutive factor in supercrip narratives, but race is not a central analytic of the scholarship. Relatedly, only a few scholars have analyzed how audience identity impacts the reception and interpretation of representations of disabled people, while focusing primarily on how disabled people at large respond, as opposed to disabled people of color or people of color more generally.⁶

A major exception to this trend is a blog post titled, “White Privilege & Inspiration Porn,” by activist Vilissa Thompson, in which she responds to white disabled critiques of the story of Anaya Ellick, a Black disabled girl who won a penmanship contest, as inspiration porn. Thompson argues that, although she too is critical of inspiration porn, sometimes she does share stories on social media that

⁴ Beth Haller and Jeffrey Preston “Confirming Normalcy: ‘Inspiration Porn’ and the Construction of the Disabled Subject?”; Sami Schalk “Reevaluating the Supercrip.”

⁵ Russel Meeuf 110-111; Schalk “Reevaluating the Supercrip” 80-81.

⁶ Ronald Berger “Disability and the Dedicated Wheelchair Athlete: Beyond the Supercrip Critique.”; Haller and Preston; Amit Kama “Supercrips Versus the Pitiful Handicapped: Reception of Disabling Images by Disabled Audience Members.”

have an inspirational bent to them. As a Black disabled woman, Thompson asserts that she does “not have the ‘luxury’ of picking and choosing stories that depict us [Black disabled people] in a positive, non-inspirational light...each time we read about a Black disabled person and it is not about us being victimized, traumatized, or killed, we hold tight to those stories because we see a part of ourselves.”⁷ Thompson’s post provides insight into how the race and (dis)ability identities of the individuals in a representation, as well as those of the audience, can impact the reception of potential inspiration porn.⁸ Her arguments also provide a starting point for my own: that inspiration porn, as it is currently understood in activist and academic circles alike, is primarily a “White Disability Studies” concept that ultimately operates differently within Black and other racialized experiences and representations of disability.⁹

I argue that Disability Studies scholars have yet to adequately explore how race may necessitate adapting our understandings of inspiration porn. More broadly, I contend that Disability Studies needs to grapple with how non-white racial contexts may necessitate shifting or discarding certain terms and concepts in the field that have been almost exclusively developed and deployed in the context of white experiences, understandings, and representations of disability. This argument matters not only for Black and Critical Race Disability Studies scholars who need to examine the utility of concepts and theories in white Disability Studies for our work, but also for Disability Studies scholars working on white experiences, understandings, and representations of disability. These scholars, I argue, need to be more explicit in naming the objects of their analysis as exclusively white, acknowledging the potential that their concepts will not translate to other racial contexts.

In order to support these arguments, I use the viral story of Michael Mack, Jr.’s *Black Panther* prosthetic leg as a case study for examining the impact of race on so-called inspirational representations of disability. To do so, I first provide a timeline overview of how the *Black Panther* prosthetic video and story circulated during the summer of 2018 in two relatively distinct, racialized waves. Subsequently, I undertake a comparative analysis of the two waves of media coverage. I demonstrate that while the first wave of coverage from Black digital media outlets focused almost exclusively on Mack’s “Black boy joy” and the power of representation for Black

⁷ Vilissa Thompson. "White Privilege & Inspiration Porn."

⁸ I use (dis)ability “to reference the overarching social system of bodily and mental norms that includes ability and disability” and disability when referring to the specific identity, category or experience within the social system of (dis)ability (Schalk *Bodyminds Reimagined* 6). Also, other scholars have also explored how inspiration-related concepts like triumph and overcoming have similarly been taken up differently by black disabled people (Day; Mollow).

⁹ Chris Bell. "Introducing White Disability Studies: A Modest Proposal."

people, the second wave of coverage from mainstream, white, local news outlets conformed more to the norms of inspiration porn by focusing on Mack's disability and representing him as the exceptional, yet passive recipient of non-disabled charity. Although almost all of the media coverage of this story drew on similar positive affective registers like inspiration and joy, the emphases and frameworks vary, predominantly along racial lines. The racial differences in framing this viral video provide insight into how concepts within Disability Studies, like inspiration porn, which have been primarily developed and deployed in regard to white experiences and representations of disability, may need to be adjusted or discarded in the context of racialized subjects to account for the specificity of cultural norms and racial histories.

The *Black Panther* Prosthetic Leg Video: A Viral Timeline

The concept of *going viral* is a relatively new one in our culture. In their book on the subject, Karine Nahon and Jeff Hemsley write that going viral refers to “a naturally occurring, emergent phenomenon facilitated by the interwoven collection of websites that allow users to host and share content (e.g., YouTube, Instagram, Flickr), connect with friends and people with similar interests (e.g., Facebook, Twitter), and share their knowledge (e.g., Wikipedia, blogs).”¹⁰ Typically, when something goes viral, information in the form of a video or image is shared and viewed widely and “with a speed and reach never before available to the vast majority of people.”¹¹ Going viral is a relatively subjective phenomenon in that opinions on what counts as viral in terms of reach (e.g., the numbers of views, likes, shares, or comments) and speed (i.e., how quickly those numbers rack up after original posting) varies widely and changes frequently. While several thousand views or shares may have constituted a viral video in the early days of social media in the early 2000s, hundreds of thousands, if not millions of views or shares typically constituted going viral in 2018, when the *Black Panther* prosthetic leg video was circulating. Although there is no way to predict perfectly what content will go viral, the process does rely on the participation of gatekeepers, or the “people, collectives, companies, or governments that, as a result of their location in a network, can promote or suppress the movement of information from one part of a network to another.”¹² With regard to viral content created by average users, gatekeepers are typically media companies and people, such as celebrities who possess a large social media reach and who share the content, giving it the signal boost it needs to circulate widely.

¹⁰ Karine Nahon and Jeff Hemsley, *Going Viral*, 2.

¹¹ Nahon and Hemsley, 2.

¹² *Ibid.*, 7.

In this section, I provide a narrative timeline for the viral circulation of the *Black Panther* prosthetic video to provide context for how Mack's story initially circulated in essentially two waves. This information is also displayed in Table 1 at the end of this essay. This narrative timeline demonstrates how the video first circulated among Black media outlets and audiences, before gaining a second wave of national attention among mainstream, white-dominated media outlets, after a local news station interviewed Mack and his mother about the viral video.

The initial gatekeeper signal boost for the video was provided on June 3, 2018, three days after Purnell's original posting. "Because of Them We Can" shared the video on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, all with the same caption: "This young boy just got a new Black Panther-themed prosthetic leg and his priceless reaction is enough to make your entire day," followed by the hashtags #blackboyjoy, #wakandaforever, and #becauseofthemwecan.¹³ "Because of Them We Can" is a Black media outlet that Eunique Jones launched in 2013. The outlet emerged from her "desire to share our rich history and promising future through images that would refute stereotypes and build the esteem of our children."¹⁴ It is important to note that the video first gained widespread attention through a Black media outlet whose focus is on sharing positive representations of Black people for a predominantly Black audience. This context likely helped shape the video's circulation and attending frameworks as it spread across the internet.

In the week after receiving the initial signal boost from "Because of Them We Can," the *Black Panther* prosthetic video gained additional coverage from seven Black media outlets, each with moderate to major reach, particularly among Black people. First, *Ebony* and *The Grio*, two major Black news and media outlets, covered the story on June 4, 2018 on their websites. *Madame Noire* and *Essence* soon followed suit with stories on June 7 and 8, respectively. The video was then featured in short news stories on several smaller Black popular culture media outlets between June 9 and 12, including *Blavity*, *Bossip*, and *BCK Online*. My research indicates that, although individuals of many races viewed, shared, and commented on the video across various platforms, only Black media outlets initially picked up the story.

¹³ @becauseofthem, "This Young Boy Just Got a New Black Panther-Themed Prosthetic Leg and His Priceless Reaction Is Enough to Make Your Entire Day"; Because of Them We Can by Eunique Jones., "Young Boy Gets Superhero Prosthetic Leg"; @becauseofthem, "This Young Boy Just Got a New #Blackpanther Themed Prosthetic Leg and His Priceless Reaction Is Enough to Make Your Entire Day. (Video Credit: Milton Purnell on FB) #Blackboyjoy #Becauseofthemwecan #Wakandaforever".

¹⁴ Because Of Them We Can, "Meet Us - Because of Them, We Can."

The particularity of these Black media outlets matters for any interpretation of how they represent a Black disabled person. Publications like *Ebony* and *Essence* began as paper magazines that aimed to represent Black people and their accomplishments in a positive light, often emphasizing middle-class values and an adherence to respectability politics.¹⁵ While other Black media outlets like *The Griot*, *Madame Noire*, and *Blavity* are more recent and exclusively online, they also focus on Black news, entertainment, and popular culture with a leftist, middle-class bent. Black media outlets, therefore, often are invested in positive, uplifting, and even inspirational representations of Black people, and this particular cultural context is essential to interpreting their coverage of Michael Mack, Jr's viral video.

On June 13, 2018, Purnell's video of Mack received a second wave of attention when Mack, McNeill, and Purnell were all interviewed for the local news. WRAL, the NBC affiliate station in Raleigh, sent reporter Bryan Mims to cover the story. The four minute and thirteen second segment provides an overview of Mack's personal story, as well as the story of how the *Black Panther* prosthetic leg video went viral.¹⁶ Also, on June 13, 2018, Spectrum Local News Central North Carolina posted a video segment about Mack that was just under two minutes in length.¹⁷ The next day, WSOC-TV, the ABC affiliate station in Charlotte produced a segment about Mack, and few days later, on June 18, WTVD, the ABC affiliate station in Durham, produced one as well.¹⁸ The latter three, Spectrum News, WTVD, and WSOC-TV all appear to have used the WRAL original interview footage, though each incorporated some sound bites that were not included in the final version of the WRAL segment.¹⁹

Finally, between June 14 and June 18, 2018, the content produced by the local North Carolina news stations, primarily those from WRAL and WTVD, were shared by a variety of news and media outlets, including *Yahoo Sports*, *The Root* (the only Black news outlet in this wave of coverage), and local news stations in

¹⁵ For more on themes of uplift, inspiration & respectability in black media, see Brown or Rooks.

¹⁶ Brian Mims, "Raleigh Boy Given Superhero-Like Powers with New 'Black Panther' Prosthetic."

¹⁷ Tara Herrschaft, "Local Artist Surprises Boy with Black Panther Prosthetic."

¹⁸ Elsa Gillis, "10-Year-Old with Amputated Leg Receives Special Black Panther Themed Prosthetic" and Michael Perchick, "Raleigh Tattoo Artist Surprises 10-Year-Old with Black Panther-Themed Prosthetic Leg."

¹⁹ I make this claim because some of the content in these videos is the exact same as WRAL segment, the interviewees are wearing the same clothes in all four local news stories, and it is only in the WRAL video that viewers see and hear the reporter and Mack in the same space.

Cincinnati, Chicago, and New York.²⁰ With the exception of *The Root*, all of the coverage in this wave emanated from more mainstream sources, with white reporters in the videos creating content for a predominantly white audience. This context too shapes the emphasis and approach taken in the coverage of the viral video in this second wave.

By late June, almost as quickly as it began, the viral attention faded away. To reiterate, there were two major waves of media coverage of the *Black Panther* prosthetic video: The first wave occurred between June 3 and 12, when the video was featured and shared on numerous Black media websites and social media accounts; the second wave occurred between June 13 and June 18, when Mack, McNeill, and Purnell were interviewed by local news station WRAL and the interview footage was used to produce three other local news segments about Mack and the viral video. These four local news segments were then replicated and shared by other local and national media outlets. Having established this timeline of the viral video, in the next section I will comparatively analyze the approaches of the two waves of media coverage in more detail.

Black Boy Joy Meets Inspiration Porn

The media coverage of Purnell's video and of Mack himself is an excellent and illustrative example of how race can impact the framing and reception of content that can be used as inspiration porn. I want to emphasize "can be used" in the previous sentence because, like supercrip, inspiration porn is a narrative framework for presenting content that includes people with disabilities. In other words, images and videos of disabled people are not in and of themselves automatically inspiration porn—a point I hope will become increasingly clear as I analyze the differences in how the video is framed and discussed in the first wave of coverage by Black media outlets versus the second wave of coverage by local, mainstream media outlets.²¹ My aim is to both complicate our understanding of inspiration porn, as well as consider whether the term is useful or applicable in the context of non-white disabled people.

²⁰ Breanna Edwards, "Wakanda Forever: Watch the Moment This 10-Year-Old Gets His Brand-New Black Panther Prosthetic Leg"; Michael Perchick, "North Carolina Tattoo Artist Surprises 10-Year-Old with Black Panther Prosthetic"; Michael Perchick, "Tattoo Artist Surprises 10-Year-Old with Black Panther-Themed Prosthetic Leg"; WKRC, "Boy Surprised with 'Black Panther' Prosthetic Leg"; WTVD, "Raleigh Tattoo Artist Surprises 10-Year-Old with Black Panther-Themed Prosthetic Leg."

²¹ Note that my analysis is focused on the language used within these two waves of media coverage. I do not explore audience comments, however, social media quantitative and qualitative analysis of comments on representations of disabled people is immensely valuable to expanding our understanding of inspiration porn as a narrative framework influenced by the race and (dis)ability identities of the subjects of representation, journalists, and audience members alike.

First Wave of Media Coverage

The first wave of coverage by Black media outlets operated in a fairly consistent way, focusing on two similar themes across the seven articles: Black boy joy and the power of positive representations. As a whole, the media coverage in this wave focuses almost exclusively on race, with little to no explicit attention to disability, while still relying on positive affect to induce emotion in readers and viewers, as one would expect from inspiration porn.

Black boy joy is a social media term that is used to affirm that Black men and boys are allowed to have a range of emotions and to reject the norms of toxic Black masculinity. The hashtag #BlackBoyJoy was originally popularized by Chance the Rapper on an Instagram post in 2016 and has since been used widely on social media to mark posts about and representations of happy Black boys and men, similar to the use of #BlackGirlMagic for Black women and girls.²² Danielle Young writes that the Black boy joy “hashtag is a celebration of black childhood and the innocence of it. Black men rarely get the chance to revel in childhood or enjoy violence-free memories... [because] throughout history, our boys have been denied their childhood.”²³ #BlackBoyJoy was used by “Because of Them We Can” during its first signal boost social media sharing of the *Black Panther* prosthetic video and continued to appear in most Black media outlet coverage of Mack’s viral video. This particular cultural context matters deeply to any interpretation of the use of positive affect in media cover of the *Black Panther* prosthetic leg viral video.

The Black boy joy hashtag appears directly in the title of *The Griot* article and the phrase is used in the body of the articles in *Ebony*, *Madame Noire*, and *BCK Online*, collectively representing over half of the first wave of media coverage.²⁴ Throughout these articles, the emphasis is primarily on Mack’s emotional response at seeing the *Black Panther* prosthetic for the first time, rather than on his “overcoming” disability or on a non-disabled person helping him.²⁵ This distinction matters, because readers and viewers are invited to share in Mack’s joy, rather than be inspired or moved by his mere existence or survival. As the *Madame Noir* article title asserts “This Young Boy’s *Reaction To Receiving A Black Panther Pros-*

²² See: BuzzFeedVideo, “What Is Black Boy Joy?”; @chancetherapper, “#Blackboyjoy.”

²³ Danielle Young, “On Reclaiming ‘Boy’ and Giving Young Black Men Something to Celebrate.”

²⁴ Kia Morgan-Smith, “Little Boy’s Reaction to Getting a Black Panther Prosthetic Leg Is Pure #Blackboyjoy”; Renese, “This Young Boy’s Reaction to Receiving a Black Panther Prosthetic Leg Will Blow You Away”; Christina Santi, “Boy Rejoices after Getting Black Panther-Themed Prosthetic Leg (Video)”; and Tiffany Silva, “Little Boy Gets ‘Black Panther’ Themed Prosthetic Leg.”

²⁵ The *Blavity* and *Bossip* articles also emphasize Mack’s emotional reaction, but do not explicitly use the phrase “black boy joy.”

thetic Leg Will Blow You Away.”²⁶ In other words, the articles frame the video as something that makes Black people feel good or hopeful in response to a positive representation of a Black child rather than, as inspiration porn does, use a representation of the disabled Other to make those with ability privilege feel better about or more appreciative of their lives. It is important, therefore, in analyzing the use of positive affect in this wave of coverage, to distinguish between emotional frameworks that perpetuate ableist notions that disabled people are in need of help or pity and emotional frameworks like Black boy joy which use positive representations of Black men and boys to resist racist ideologies of Black masculinity. One cannot conflate the way Black media outlets refer to the video as “heartwarming” and other similar terminology with the ableist positive affect created by inspiration porn.²⁷ To do so would ignore the important cultural context of Black media’s history of racial uplift as a goal and the contemporary social media use of positive representations of Black people as inspiration for one another through concepts like Black boy joy and Black girl magic.

The second central theme of the Black media outlet coverage of the *Black Panther* prosthetic viral video is the power of representation. While all of the articles in this wave mention either *Black Panther* or Wakanda, the fictional un-colonized African nation in the film (or both), four of the seven articles, *Ebony*, *Madame Noir*, *Essence* and *BCK Online*, specifically discuss the importance and power of this positive representation for Black people. The article in *Essence*, for example, states that *Black Panther* “had a significant impact on young Black people who finally saw themselves on the big screen as superheroes for the very first time” and concludes with the assertion that “it’s clear *Black Panther* will continue to have a positive impact on our lives, and more importantly our young people’s lives, for years to come. #WakandaForever.”²⁸ Research shows that media representations can significantly impact self-perceptions and self-esteem among marginalized groups.²⁹ In this wave of coverage Black media outlets emphasize that Mack’s joyful surprise at seeing his *Black Panther* prosthetic is illustrative of the empowering role media can have for Black people, especially Black children.

As my discussion of these themes suggests, positive affect was used in the first wave of media coverage of the viral video in a way that is racially affirming and uplifting, rather than blatantly ableist. For instance, two articles in this wave use the word “inspiration,” but both use it to refer to how Purnell drew inspiration from

²⁶ Renese, “This Young Boy’s Reaction.” Emphasis added.

²⁷ Santi, Christina. “Boy Rejoices.”

²⁸ Britni Danielle, “This Little Boy Got a ‘Black Panther’ Themed Prosthetic Leg and His Reaction Will Make Your Day.”

²⁹ See, for example, Boboltz and Yam, *The Opportunity Agenda*, and Zhang and Haller.

Black Panther to create the artwork for the prosthetic leg.³⁰ Similar to the assertions of the power of representation, these uses of inspiration draw directly on how this powerful, positive representation of Black heroes and heroines can inspire Black people to view and imagine themselves outside of colonialism and white supremacy. This kind of inspiration is distinct from that of inspiration porn, which uses disabled people (a marginalized group) to inspire non-disabled people (a privileged group) to appreciate their lives/bodies or work harder at achieving their goals. In this case, the articles note the importance of marginalized people creating representations that inspire and empower people within that same marginalized group. In Disability Studies, some scholars have similarly questioned blanket rejection of inspiration used in response to disabled people to consider how inspiration may work within disability communities.³¹

While I contend that the general use of inspiration and positive affect in this wave of media coverage was not “inspiration porn,” this does not mean that these representations were not ableist in another, racially specific way. Across this first wave, the Black media outlets emphasized race and paid little to no attention to disability—the words *amputee* and *disabled* (and any variation on these words) were never used, though the word *prosthetic* did appear and Mack’s disability was visually apparent and centered in the viral video itself. Disability was not erased so much as it was left uncommented upon. Only the article from *The Grio* draws explicit attention to Mack’s disability, stating in the final sentence: “We’re not sure what the circumstances are surrounding Mikey’s situation on how he lost his leg.”³² This direct reference to Mack’s disability is incredibly brief, but does gesture toward the ableist impulse to know the origins of a person’s disability. Of course, prior to the WRAL interview, people writing about the video had no additional information about Mack or his disability to include, so it’s impossible to know if such information would have been included if it had been available.³³

For the first wave of Black media outlet coverage, disability was not the most important or interesting part of the viral video, even as disability via Mack’s need for a new prosthetic was the reason for the moment in the video occurring in the first place. Instead, for Black media outlets, the appeal of the viral video was in Mack’s Black boy joy and in its demonstration of the power of representation.

³⁰ Bossip Staff, “A Lil Positivity: This Young Boy’s Reaction to His New ‘Black Panther’ Themed Prosthetic Leg Is Absolutely Heart-Warming”; Danielle.

³¹ Wendy L. Chrisman, “A Reflection on Inspiration: A Recuperative Call for Emotion in Disability Studies”; Simi Linton, *My Body Politic: A Memoir*, 198.

³² Morgan-Smith. “Little Boy’s Reaction.

³³ *The Root*, the only black media outlet to cover the viral video in the second wave, does include one sentence about how Mack became disabled. I discuss this in the next section.

Nonetheless, the fact that disability wasn't explicitly mentioned or engaged in the majority of the Black media coverage is, I contend, ableist, even if ableist in a different way than inspiration porn. Inspiration porn overemphasizes disability, but the refusal to recognize disability as a mutually constitutive aspect of Mack's identity and lived experience might suggest to viewers and readers that disability is ultimately something that is shameful or private and thus should not be openly discussed.

To understand this in the context of Blackness, we might consider how there is a cultural norm of distancing one's self from disability identity in Black communities due to: 1) histories of disabling racial violence that make disability commonplace in many Black communities and, 2) histories of justifying of racism via discourses of disability, which position all Black people as inherent disabled in comparison to whites.³⁴ This racial context and history is essential to any interpretation of the lack of explicit engagement with disability in the first wave of black media coverage. We can identify the ableist ideologies of shame and stigma that may be influencing this erasure of disability, but those ideologies cannot be separated from the racialized history of disability and the disabling history of race, especially when discussing representations of Black disabled people by Black media outlets. This then is why a Critical Race approach to so-called inspiration porn is so necessary and why I am arguing that the term itself may not be useful in a Black Disability Studies context.

Second Wave of Media Coverage

The second wave of media coverage with video interview segments from local news outlets occurred between June 13 and June 18, 2018. It differed greatly from the first wave of coverage from Black media outlets in that these news stories employed inspiration porn frameworks. By comparing what the reporters say in the video about Mack and disability versus what Mack expresses about being disabled, I highlight how inspiration porn functions as a narrative framework applied to a person or representation that relies on certain ableist narrative mechanisms. Further, by comparing this wave of media coverage to the previous one, I demonstrate how racial context influences our understanding of inspiration porn. I contend that, in order to function, inspiration porn must (over)emphasize disability and ignore or sideline race—something that is accomplished more easily in regard to white disabled people, whose racialization typically remains unmarked in the contemporary United States. In other words, inspiration porn is most successful when disability becomes the dominant identity within a representation and other identities such as race are ignored, erased, or suppressed as part of the narrative.

³⁴ See, for example, Baynton, Erevelles, Schalk *Bodyminds Reimagined*, or Tyler.

An inspiration porn framework was first employed in this wave of media coverage through its focus on disability as a challenge to overcome. Three of the four video news stories in the second wave of coverage, WRAL, WSOC-TV, and WTVD, include information about why and when Michael Mack, Jr.'s leg was amputated, adhering to the ableist desire to know *what happened*, a desire that conceives of disability primarily as loss, tragedy, and trauma, rather than as difference, gain, or even just a neutral experience. Additionally, the WRAL and Spectrum News segments both discuss how Mack has been bullied about his prosthetic leg as an example of the challenges he still faces. Although Mack does admit that some kids who see his prosthetic “get a disgusted look,” he also insists that now, with the new artwork, he believes other kids will “think it’s really cool.”³⁵ Nonplussed about those ableist stares, Mack makes it clear that he doesn’t see his amputation as an obstacle. In the WRAL interview, when asked about his disability, Mack states succinctly: “It hasn’t been a challenge at all.”³⁶ When his mother interrupts to say, “Maybe not for you, but it’s been a challenge for me,” Mack laughs, unfazed, and agrees: “Yea, it’s been a challenge for her.”³⁷ In this moment, it’s clear that Mack does not view himself as having overcome anything, even as reporters employed inspiration porn frameworks to represent disability as the dominant, challenging force in his life. Reporters may have employed this approach because of his age and perceived naivety or because of their own ableist beliefs that life with a disability is inherently difficult or painful.

Inspiration porn would not be “inspirational,” however, if it stopped at representing the disabled subject as pitiful and tragic. This narrative framework becomes insidious because it presents itself as positive and uplifting, as celebrating disabled people even as it still perpetuates ableist ideas of disability as a pitiful tragedy to be overcome through exceptional effort. This turn to inspiration occurred in the second wave of media coverage. Across all four news segments, Mack was described by what Silva and Howe in their work on supercrip narratives call “superlative terminology.”³⁸ The use of superlative terminology that exceptionalized Mack in this wave of media coverage relied on low social expectations for what disabled people can do and focused more on his attitude and presumed overcoming than on the societal and environmental barriers that shape his experience as a Black disabled boy in a racist, ableist world. For example, in this wave of local news stories, Mack was referred to as “an amazing young man” who looks and feels like

³⁵ Herrschaft, “Local Artist Surprises Boy.”

³⁶ Mims, “Raleigh Boy Given Superhero-Like Powers.”

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Silva and Howe, “Little Boy Gets ‘Black Panther’ Themed Prosthetic Leg, 186.

a superhero, but “needs no suit to be a shining light to others,” as he refuses to let an “amputation hold him back.”³⁹

The language throughout the local news stories positioned Mack as the exception to some ableist rule that disabled people should be passive, sad, drab, and hidden away at home. Further, the WSOC-TV and WTVD interviews both claim that Mack hopes to be a “spokesperson” for other children with amputations and inspire them. Although Mack is never directly quoted using the words *spokesperson* or *inspire*, in the WSOC-TV interview, he does say that it would “be cool to help out other kids in need with this type of stuff.”⁴⁰ While it is unclear if “this type of stuff” refers to amputations specifically or disabilities generally, it is notable that Mack says “kids in need.” Although it is likely that reporters included this quote to attempt to demonstrate Mack’s supposed desire to be a role model who inspires all disabled/amputee children, it seems just as plausible that Mack uses “in need” to refer to financial need. After all, in the same interview Mack asserts, “amputee kids, they can pretty much do anything,” suggesting he doesn’t believe that all other kids with similar disabilities need his help or inspiration.⁴¹ As a whole, the superlative language that frames Mack as exceptional, while seemingly positive and uplifting, ultimately relies on additional oppressive ableist ideologies about disabled people.

Finally, the media coverage in the second wave employed an inspiration porn framework by rhetorically positioning Mack as the passive recipient of generosity. In the WRAL interview, Mack states that his mother encouraged him to get the *Black Panther* artwork on his prosthetic. This suggests that, while he was indeed surprised and overjoyed with the final results, as depicted in the original viral video, the artwork was commissioned, likely paid for, and originally the idea of mother and son. Nonetheless, the titles of the local news stories all state that Purnell surprised Mack with the custom prosthetic or refer to Mack as receiving or being given the prosthetic. This is particularly apparent in the case of WTVD, which featured Mack as an “ABC 11 Together” story, a segment which “highlights the strength of the human spirit, good deeds, community needs, and how our viewers can help.”⁴²

By putting this story in the “Together” segment, WTVD suggests that either Mack is an example of the strength of the human spirit (relying on concepts of overcoming) or that Purnell creating custom artwork is an example of a local good

³⁹ Herrschaft; Mims; Perchick, "Raleigh Tattoo Artist Surprises 10-Year-Old with Black Panther-Themed Prosthetic Leg."

⁴⁰ Gillis, "10-Year-Old with Amputated Leg."

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Perchick "Raleigh Tattoo Artist Surprises 10-Year-Old with Black Panther-Themed Prosthetic Leg."

deed. In comparison, the titles from the first wave of media coverage did not mention Purnell at all and predominantly positioned Mack as active, stating that his reaction to getting his new prosthetic will “blow you away,” “make your day” and “melt your heart.”⁴³ The first wave black media outlet titles focus on Mack and his black boy joy reaction while the second wave local news outlet titles frame the story as one of a generous, nondisabled person providing a gift to a disabled child. While both approaches encourage positive feelings in the audience, the latter approach relies on ableist ideas of disabled people as passive object of charity.⁴⁴

Undoubtedly, the general trend in the media coverage of Michael Mack, Jr. and the *Black Panther* prosthetic viral video in the second wave of media coverage leans heavily toward an inspiration porn framework. The coverage in this wave promotes ableist, pity-inspired emotions among its predominantly white viewers, standing in stark contrast to the first wave in which positive affect was employed among a predominantly Black audience as a response to Mack’s Black boy joy at seeing his new prosthetic, a reaction that exemplifies the power of positive representations for Black people. Notably, *The Root*, the only Black media outlet to have conducted a story on Mack in the second wave of coverage, is the only media outlet to explicitly address both Blackness and disability in the same article. The piece opens with the statement “The cultural significance and impact of *Black Panther* will never die” and, quoting from the WRAL interview, includes information about why and when Mack’s leg was amputated.⁴⁵ This coverage of “Mack’s fresh-as-all-hell leg” is the closest there is to an intersectional approach to the story that considers Black disability as a distinct experience.⁴⁶

Conclusion: Implications for Black Disability Studies

As my above comparative analysis of the first and second wave of media coverage of the *Black Panther* prosthetic viral video demonstrates, there is a clear difference between how Black media outlets and local news outlets approached the story. The differences in frameworks and narrative mechanisms employed in the two waves are, I argue, primarily due to the different racial identities of those in the video, those producing the coverage, and those in the intended audience. The impact of race on the presentation and reception of a viral video of a disabled person is therefore important to consider in any work on inspiration porn. My analysis here also demonstrates the need to understand and discuss inspiration porn, like

⁴³ Danielle; Janay; Renese; Santi.

⁴⁴ For another example analyzing this kind of rhetorical approach toward a black disabled person, see Gill and Erevelles.

⁴⁵ Edwards, “Wakanda Forever.”

⁴⁶ Ibid.

supercrip, as a narrative framework that relies on certain narrative mechanisms to operate. Identifying how these various mechanisms appear and function differently across racial groups is an essential part of developing Disability Studies theoretical frameworks that refuse to be race-neutral and instead seek to understand how race, including whiteness, shapes experiences, representations, and interpretations of disability.

Many concepts and theories of disability were developed through analysis of white disability only. Applying these concepts and theories broadly without accounting for the nuances of a different racial context can result in misinterpretations and faulty analysis. For instance, if one merely looks at the fact that the majority of the Black media outlets took a positive emotional spin on the story by using phrases like “heart-warming,” one might be inclined to label this coverage inspiration porn. But as my analysis demonstrates, the use of positive affect in the first wave coverage was primarily in relationship to concepts of Black boy joy and the power of positive representation rather than as an explicit response to disability. This Black cultural context is essential to interpreting the role of affect in the first wave of media coverage and much would be lost without it.

This does not, of course, mean that the representations of the *Black Panther* prosthetic viral video in the first wave of coverage by black media outlets were not ableist. Indeed, I contend that the avoidance of an engagement with disability in the Black media stories may very well reflect the stigma and shame surrounding acknowledgement of disability in Black communities. However, this racially contextualized form of ableism is not the same as that expressed in inspiration porn. Since inspiration porn relies heavily on the (over)emphasis on disability above all other identities and Black media coverage attends primarily to Black identity first, I argue that this term is not as useful in analyzing Black media representations of disabled people that use inspiration and other forms of positive affect. We can and should be critical of the erasure or avoidance of disability identity and disability politics in the Black media coverage and push for better recognition of racial and disability identities within all media coverage of Black disabled people, but in this case, simply calling these various representations of Mack’s story all inspiration porn fails to attend to the critical racial context that is necessary to understand the differences between the first and second waves, despite their similar affective approaches.

In closing, I want to broaden these arguments beyond inspiration porn alone. Despite the increasing amount of work on race and disability, the field of Disability Studies still needs to account for the ways whiteness informs its foundational theories. We must consider how terms like inspiration porn, supercrip, narrative prosthesis, compulsory able-bodiedness, misfitting, cripp, and so on have been pri-

marily developed and used with “whiteness as [their] constitutive underpinning.”⁴⁷ Scholars throughout the field must acknowledge the whiteness of their work explicitly: Say when the representations in a study are all white and acknowledge when race is not a central analytic.

For those of us doing Critical Race Disability Studies and Black Disability studies in particular, I hope this example of racial differences in the use of inspiration porn frameworks encourages more scholars to assess and explore how other major theoretical concepts in Disability Studies might need to be adjusted or even discarded when analyzing racialized experiences and representations of disability, overall. This is not to say Black Disability Studies needs an entirely different lexicon, but rather that we should not assume concepts developed in regard to white experiences and representations of disability manifest in the exact same way among other races, as I have demonstrated here in regard to inspiration porn. As a result, Critical Race and Black Disability Studies scholars should feel free to adapt or discard the concepts and theories that don’t align with the trends and themes we are discovering in our research. This work can draw on the example of Black Queer Studies and Black Feminist Theory as models for developing new theories, as well as adapting or critiquing those from the wider fields with which we are in conversation. Black Disability Studies should always be grounded in the intellectual history and contemporary conversations of Disability Studies in general, but our work should also never be confined by how white scholars and activists have previously understood, defined, and delimited the field. As my analysis of the *Black Panther* prosthetic viral video indicates, attention to the nuances of racial context, such as uplift ideology or racially specific terms like Black boy joy, can and should change our understanding of the representation of disabled subjects. We need Critical Race approaches to studying the creation, dissemination and impact of inspiration porn and other Disability Studies concepts and frameworks.

⁴⁷ Bell, 275.

Table 1

VIRAL TIMELINE		
Date	Outlet	Title
6/4/2018	Ebony	Boy Rejoices After Getting Black Panther-Themed Prosthetic Leg (VIDEO)
	The Griot	Little boy’s reaction to getting a Black Panther prosthetic leg is pure #blackboyjoy
6/7/2018	Madame Noire	This Young Boy’s Reaction to Receiving A Black Panther Prosthetic Leg Will Blow You Away
6/8/2018	Essence	This Little Boy Got A ‘Black Panther’ Themed Prosthetic Leg and His Reaction Will Make Your Day
6/9/2018	Blavity	This Young Boy's Reaction to His New 'Black Panther'-Themed Prosthetic Leg Is Enough to Melt Your Whole Heart
6/10/2018	Bossip	A Lil Positivity: This Young Boy’s Reaction to His New ‘Black Panther’ Themed Prosthetic Leg Is Absolutely Heart-Warming
6/12/2018	BCK Online	Little Boy Gets “Black Panther” Themed Leg
6/13/2018	WRAL	Raleigh boy given superhero-like powers with new 'Black Panther' prosthetic
	Spectrum Local News	Local Artist Surprises Boy with Black Panther Prosthetic
6/14/2018	WSOC TV	10-year-old with amputated leg receives special Black Panther themed prosthetic
	The Root	Wakanda Forever: Watch the Moment This 10-Year-Old Gets His Brand-New Black Panther Prosthetic Leg
6/18/2018	ABC 11 (WTVD)	Raleigh tattoo artist surprises 10-year-old with Black Panther-themed prosthetic leg

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Black Autism: A Conversation with Diana Paulin¹

Julia Miele Rodas

On May 18, 2019, at the Hotel Belleclaire on Manhattan's Upper West Side, I had the privilege of sitting down with Diana Rebekkah Paulin, author of the Errol Hill Award-winning *Imperfect Unions: Staging Miscegenation in U.S. Drama and Fiction* and Associate Professor of American Studies and English at Trinity College, Hartford. This interview was the outgrowth of years of more casual, ongoing conversations with Dr. Paulin about the ways that autism articulates with experiences of race, voice, representation, parenting, and definitions of personhood. Over the years, my conversations with Dr. Paulin have been far-ranging and exploratory, informed by intellectual questions as well as by personal concerns. The purpose of formalizing this conversation and bringing it to print is to offer readers a glimpse of Dr. Paulin's ongoing, long-term project—delving into expressions, experiences, and representations of Black autism and exploring the cultural configurations of autism in Black families and communities. The dialogue transcribed here is grounded in our May 18 interview and draws as well on the arc of our longer conversations to present some of her project's core questions.

Julia Miele Rodas: I'd like to begin by asking you about a quotation from Paul Heilker's article, "Autism, Rhetoric, and Whiteness," where he talks about autism "being rhetorically constructed in public discourse as an overwhelmingly white condition." In your own project, "Black Autism," is this the starting point, this larger cultural context that privileges white autism and obscures Black autism?

Diana Rebekkah Paulin: Well, yes and no. I think part of what I'm doing is excavational work. For me, thinking about all this started almost 20 years ago. So, yeah there wasn't Prahlad's memoir, *The Secret Life of a Black Aspie*, or the co-edited volume, *All the Weight of Our Dreams*. I had to think in terms of finding blogs or personal articles or short pieces. I had to look for short films, which are really hard to find. YouTube has been my friend! I've been collecting bits from a wide variety of sources, like *Autism: the Musical*—there's a young biracial boy, whose mother is very insistent on his ability to play the cello, and their family dynamics are also part of this, and there are also these twin boys who are African American who ar-

¹ Dr. Paulin and I are both grateful to the Metropolitan Museum of Art—and to Rebecca McGinnis (Senior Managing Educator, Accessibility) and Marie Clapot (Assistant Educator, Accessibility), in particular—for inviting us to speak about autism aesthetics as part of the museum's "Crip the Met" public programming; this exciting Met event provided both the opportunity and established the larger context for this interview.

en't really featured, but they're sort of in the background of this production. I'm also still considering this, but in *The Secret Life of Bees*, there's a sister, May, one of the members of the family. She writes little notes and bits of poetry. And, to me, she reads as autistic. It's like she's too fragile for this world they're in, and she can't stand the racialized violence, and she escapes by drowning herself. I'm thinking about these spaces, asking how this character fits. What is it that she's representing that's unnamable, that fits into a longer trajectory of neurodivergence that kind of gets glossed over? I do see these flashes, these excerpts of culture, as an archive that is just being built. So, the project is excavational in that it's looking at stagings of autism and representations of Blackness. I can't ignore the historical disparities in diagnoses among people of color.

JMR: This kind of excavation, building this kind of archive is already a vital piece of scholarship, but you're saying this is only part of the work?

DRP: Yeah. I also want to focus on this underexplored intersection. For example, when autism is racialized as white, it's often seen as a puzzle or something that's inscrutable. And, there are all these ways in which those same characteristics invoke pathologies applied to Blackness historically. The same tropes that get used to erase white autism have also been used to render Blackness invisible, because Blackness was always pathologized, or it was constructed as inscrutable, or it was seen as a blank space on which you infuse meaning.

JMR: So, Blackness and autism both get obscured by cultural gestures that see these identities as a kind of "blank space"?

DRP: Right. We talk about the diversity of Blackness and we talk about the diversity of autism. There are lots of different ways of being Black, just like there are lots of different ways of being autistic. But we also need to think about the ways in which autism is part of the diversity of Blackness, just as Blackness is necessarily part of the diversity of autism. I'm interested in recovering narratives of Black autistic people, but I'm especially thinking about the ways autism has been *marked* in Black communities. Black people have been institutionalized and confined or discarded because of neurodivergence. In Black communities, autism has added to the oppressive and racialized violence that was already a part of that history. But also, people survive ... and there are ways neurodivergent people have been supported and cared for and incorporated into Black families and communities and these stories of survival and resilience are important. Part of my work is to look at this creativity, look at this resilience, look at these types of values and the humanity that is part of the spectrum of both Blackness and autism.

JMR: I'm really interested in your exploration of this nurturing, inclusive space, this idea that autism has always been integral to Black community. Is it okay if I ask about a personal narrative—a story you once told me about your daughter at a family reunion?

DRP: Sure. We were in Atlanta, and we always have these family meetings, business meetings, and everyone's there, all the kids, all different generations. And they were putting together a committee to decide where the next reunion was going to be, and my 14-year-old daughter, who's autistic, raised her hand and said, "I want to be on it." And they said, "Okay, you come up," and they said, "Put her name down, record it," because we're documenting what we're doing as a family, and she has a voice in that. In the family they're like, "That's who she is. She's going to have a voice." She has all these family members who take her as she is.

JMR: I can see how this story exemplifies the kind of nurturing and resilience of neurodivergence in Black community.

DRP: Yes ... but of course we have to acknowledge the diversity of Black families and communities, also. One reason I think my family showed this kind of openness is because neurodivergence is not new to us. There have always been members of my family who were not necessarily labeled as "disabled," but they were still part of the family and were included, even if that inclusion was sometimes tricky. Narratives of familial survival and success always circulated at these gatherings, sometimes with humor, sometimes with frustrated anger, sometimes with pride. I've always known that my family shared and celebrated a resilience that often operated in tension with the desire to "overcome."

JMR: How do you see this personal narrative fragment operating in the context of other examples?

DRP: Well, early on, I found a couple of films about Black motherhood, and the way these Black women talk about their experiences really illuminates the whiteness of the dominant autism narrative and their exclusion from it. I could see there was this standard kind of autistic success story that appeals to a mainstream audience, a white story. And even though there are terrible problems with these tropes, including punishing representations of motherhood, Black women are excluded even from that. In these representations, these Black women are trying to find a place for themselves in these autism stories and they're like, "I can't even be a refrigerator mother!"²

² References early clinical writing which attributed autism in large part to frigid parenting, noting specifically that affected children "were kept neatly in refrigerators which did not defrost" (Kanner 425); the notion that "refrigerator mothers" were responsible for the development of autism in their children was later popularized by Bruno Bettelheim in *The Empty Fortress* (1967).

JMR: So, there's a kind of performance element?

DRP: Exactly. I had already been thinking through questions of performance and staging identity. And, I was also looking at historical literature and re-evaluating these kinds of representations in terms of race ...

JMR: You talk about this in your first book, *Imperfect Unions: Staging Miscegenation in U.S. Drama and Fiction* (University of Minnesota Press, 2012)?

DRP: Yeah. *Imperfect Unions* unpacks narratives of racial mixing and points out the limited language we have for talking about the complexity of identity and the historical weight that the Black–white binary still carries in mainstream cultural and political discourse. So, in terms of Black autism narratives, there's some similarity in that there's not much room, culturally, for real intersectionality. Autism stories tend to prioritize clearly delineated boundaries of identity.

JMR: What about performance?

DRP: It might be better to use the more elastic term, “staging.” The staging of autism narratives operates in really complex ways. In the example I already mentioned, you can see the way this Black parent is excluded from occupying the role of mother to an autistic child, which relies on the overdetermined implication that autism is always already white. But, various stagings of autism can also be instructive; for instance, short films and blogs and various fragments of narrative offer demonstrations of how to be autistic, or how to be part of an autistic family. These stagings can operate in ways that can be restrictive. And the more these narratives work themselves out in rigidly determined ways, the more the complexity of everyday autistic lives is undermined.

JMR: One of the motivations behind narratives that stereotype disability in general is that the culture really needs positive models. Many people find simple stories of overcoming or inspiration truly heartening. Working out more complex interpretations can mean opening up really difficult stories and spaces. Could you talk about that?

DRP: This is a really important question. I've been thinking about this in relation to Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). It started with a question from a student, who asked me if I thought *Beloved* might be autistic. This got me thinking about the dynamics in that text, how it speaks to the fractures around family that have been attached to Black identity, but also how it dovetails and overlaps with autism, presenting all these minds that are seen as inscrutable. I've especially been thinking about Sethe, the Black mother in the novel, who has experienced trauma, and the

triangulated relationship between her and her two daughters, one of whom I've come to see as neurodivergent. I wanted to think about the ways in which trauma, Blackness, and neurodivergence impact a family that's already amid racialized violence ... white supremacy. I'm trying to work through the way in which Sethe's love, her "thick love," is what leads her to slit her daughter's throat and how that is seen as inscrutable motherhood. How can that be love? You know, it doesn't make sense. It acts out the ways in which certain bodies and minds are seen as inhuman or outside of humanity and legibility—uncivilized, wild, errant—all labels that have been used to pathologize Blackness, *but also autism*, all these bodies out of control. Even the enslavers don't want her back because she's seen as outside the logic of human subjugation.

None of this makes sense unless you can consider the ways in which Sethe's "thick love" is part of her humanity. Paul D. says to her, "You know, your love is too thick." And she responds, "Thin love ain't love at all." So, this is one of the things I want to talk about, this idea of resilience and survival strategies, how this mother navigates the critiques she gets not only from whites, but also from the Black community. And that idea, that reliance on survival techniques in a world in which you are rendered outside of humanity—how do those survival techniques then translate into intergenerational knowledge, the logic of survival? *Beloved* asks us to see these radical mechanisms for recovering legibility and provides historical context for neurodivergent resilience in Black experience.

JMR: Wow. While we're on this very difficult ground, I want to ask you a question about method. It's not only that engaging with some of this material seems almost unbearable, but also that there are lots of other ways that rigorous academic scholarship poses issues of accessibility: When we write traditional scholarly monographs, we implicitly restrict our readership, but we also hold ourselves to a model of labor that isn't disability friendly and that doesn't necessarily allow for the exigencies of parenting, especially for mothers. How are you approaching work on this project in ways that will make it more accessible for a wider group of readers? And how are you creating a framework for the writing and scholarship that makes it accessible for *you*, that respects the demands of your everyday life?

DRP: This is actually the introduction, because the "authoritative voice" is rewarded in academia without a doubt, and the standards and expectations for the profession demand, in some ways, that the people who are being written about are also silenced as part of that project. I'm resistant to that in my scholarship. I always have tried to acknowledge the collaborative way in which research and writing are done. I am trying to be careful about who I'm speaking for and who I'm speaking to, and how I'm positioning myself as a member of the autism community, being careful

not to reproduce the silencing or marginalization of other voices, to allow my work to be part of a longer conversation or a larger conversation. And I recognize that even in my own personal life, I'm speaking for a daughter who is not yet able to fully articulate her own positionality. So, in terms of how to frame it, I'm thinking of people like Audre Lorde, who foreground these concerns. I'm conscious that I'm both engaging in an academic project and offering a critique at the same time.

I'm also in a place in my life and career where I need to think about what's do-able. So, a shorter structure—writing in fragments and vignettes—is more accomplishable for me, but it also makes more sense in terms of who this book is for, because it is for me, and it's for other people like me. Also, because it's collaborative and dynamic, I want to sort of set up a model that's nuanced and shifting and that acknowledges the diversity of voices that come into play in terms of thinking about Blackness and Black autism.

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Irrevocable Conditions: Black, Palestinian, Disabled Homes in Jana Elhassan's *The 99th Floor*¹

Michelle Hartman

Majd gazes over New York City while standing on a balcony high above the streets, pondering the distance he has travelled from his childhood home in the Shatila refugee camp in Beirut, Lebanon. In its very title, the Arabic-language novel, *The 99th Floor* (originally *Tabiq 99*), invokes the heights upon which Majd resides, referring to the gleaming skyscraper in which his sleek modern office is located. His office space on the 99th floor is as distant from his apartment in Harlem as it is from Shatila—the two places Majd tries to feel are somehow his home. Majd, however, never truly fits in. Neither as a Palestinian Muslim man in New York City at the turn of the 21st Century, nor as a Palestinian child whose mother and brother were murdered in one of the Lebanese Civil War's most notorious massacres during the Israeli invasion of 1982 does Majd seem to belong. The trauma and psychic wounds Majd battles are visible on his body: a large and prominent scar on his face and a pronounced limp set him apart from other people, some of whom recoil when they encounter him. Majd connects his scar and limp to his feeling that he does not have a home in New York or Lebanon; his ancestral home in Palestine, the village of Kfar Yasif, is distant and out of his reach due in great part to the ongoing colonization and genocide of his people by Israel.

"Perhaps home is not a place but simply an irrevocable condition –James Baldwin," Jana Elhassan overcodes her novel, *The 99th Floor*, with James Baldwin's famous observation, translated into Arabic and used as an epigraph.² As a Palestinian refugee and survivor of the Shatila massacre, home is elusive for Majd, and it is deeply tied to his scar and limp, which he gained during childhood, when a nearby bomb exploded. Majd's injuries structure everything in his life, giving him

¹ I would like to very sincerely thank all those people with whom I have engaged intellectually in developing this essay, and the ideas within it, including students with whom I have read *The 99th Floor* in Montreal and Beirut. Specifically, I owe a big debt of gratitude to Dr. Theri Pickens for her leadership in the field/s, the impetus to write this article, as well as her sharp critical reading eye. Thanks to Dr. Rosalind Hampton's reading of this piece, my other work, and pushing me to greatly improve it, as well as to Sarah Abdelshamy who has read, edited, and pushed my thinking further.

² This line is taken from Baldwin's 1956 novel, *Giovanni's Room* (86), which explores issues of same-sex love, and how one might locate a home in the body. Though in *The 99th Floor* this quotation is translated into Arabic, I have reproduced the original line as written by Baldwin here.

a sense of self, even while impairing him.³ Majd consistently refuses the surgeries and therapies that people offer to him over time, suggesting that making his condition revocable might disable him in a different way. At first, he senses and later asserts that changing these parts of himself might imply that his Palestinianness could therefore be revocable, as well; corrective surgery would mean abandoning his mother, his people, and his memories, he believes. The condition of home for Majd is not merely a place, or something that can exist on the surface—it resides within him, as it does for Baldwin’s characters in *Giovanni’s Room*. Home as a condition is irrevocable and cannot be changed. Thus, in order to find a place for himself in the world, Majd must hold onto his scar, his limp, and places he can claim.

My intervention in this article is to stretch the meanings of home as an “irrevocable condition,” as Baldwin articulates and a theory upon which Elhassan expands. This article grapples with the notion of a condition being irrevocable, as Baldwin suggests of his gay male characters, and as Elhassan deliberately locates in her protagonist’s impaired body. I argue that *The 99th Floor* can be read as working through multiple “irrevocable conditions,” and I examine how these conditions engage, constitute, and cannot exist without each other. More specifically, I explore how race and racialization, gender and sexuality, disability and impairment all work together as politically irrevocable conditions that are mutually constitutive and located in the body—as Baldwin explores with his notion of home in his novel. I argue that *The 99th Floor* explores how Majd locates his sense of himself in his impairments, racialized identity, and sexual expression. Majd lives with a visible limp and a scar, inflicted upon him because he lived in a refugee camp. Being a Palestinian refugee—a racialized identity in Lebanon—Majd copes with his impairment and racialized identity partly through acting out a hyper-masculine role in his intimate relationship with his female partner. He uses the confluence of all of these elements that comprise his selfhood to resist the narratives that pathologize him and his various parts, though at times he often pathologizes himself.

My readings of *The 99th Floor* unpack how the conditions of impairment and disability, and their complicated relationship to race and racialization, along with gender and sexuality, are tightly linked to a problematized notion of home. Here, home is never simple, because it is an irrevocable condition and also an unattainable one—it is the body, it is the mother, and it is land. My readings use insights from the field of Black Disability Studies, especially theories governing how race,

³ Here I use “impairment” in a way consistent with scholars who make a distinction between impairment and disability. The former is a way to understand the physical and/or mental issues a person may face, whereas the latter refers to the social, cultural, economic and other constructions and institutions that make impairment/s a problem. See the work of Nirmala Erevelles and Theri Pickens, the latter refers to Linton as a primer on thinking about this.

gender, and disability are interconnected and mutually constitutive.⁴ This framework allows me to probe the contours of experience for a character like Majd, in complex ways. The argument below unfolds in three sections. I begin this first section by probing some of the interanimating features of Black and Palestinian racialization. I do this in order to offer suggestions about how these processes of racialization are connected to slavery and dispossession, family, destruction, war, violence, and exploitation, affecting Black and Palestinian communities in ways that are similar, but also different. Racialization for Palestinians does not, for example, simply mean moving closer to Blackness, either in Lebanon or the United States, but Black American racialization is an important reference point for understanding Palestinian racialization. Starting at this point helps me to emphasize the importance of seeing the connections between these communities in relation to their racialization.

Second, I proceed with an exploration of the emblematic and collective nature of disability, especially for Black people and other people of color, and I pay especially close attention to how this emblematic and collective nature is shaped by political and racial violence, including war. In the third section, I explore how the symbolic and metaphorical uses of disability in *The 99th Floor* also have material implications, particularly as the political nature of Majd's impairment is linked to racialized, disabling narratives. Majd's scar and limp are both the direct results of being a Palestinian refugee who grew up in a camp. This means that his impairment can never be separated from the politics of its origins, and throughout the novel, this repeatedly interpellates him as Palestinian and disabled.

In the concluding section, I offer a reading of how race, disability, sexuality, and gender are tied together in the novel, while proposing that we must read beyond "good and bad" or "oppressed and free" in the characterizations of Majd and his girlfriend Hilda. A Black Disability Studies-informed reading leads to questions and suggestions about what home is and what it can be. In the conclusion, I suggest that the home being sought is located within the experience of racialized impairment and disability, thus within the body itself, as well as the people and community that surround the seeker.

Disability and Race as Mutually Constitutive: Palestinian and Black Racialization and Disability in Conversation

Overcoding *The 99th Floor* with a quotation from James Baldwin is only the first and most obvious location where Elhassan inextricably links Blackness and

⁴ I am building on the work of Christopher M. Bell, Moya Bailey and Izetta Mobley, Nirmala Erevelles, Cassandra Jackson, Therí Pickens, and Sami Schalk.

Palestinianness in the novel. Another example emerges when Majd and his father leave the Shatila refugee camp for the United States and land in Harlem, where they both begin to feel somewhat at home, while still retaining their Palestinian identity. As Majd describes his father's move to Harlem, "He fit into the neighborhood smoothly and easily, but at home he remained Palestinian."⁵ This contrasts with the strong feeling of alienation the pair experience in white America. Though Elhassan draws upon iconic, and perhaps even clichéd signifiers of African America by invoking James Baldwin and relocating her Shatila-based characters to Harlem, a deeper exploration of the text reveals that it narrates proximity and distance to Black America/ns in more complex ways.⁶ In one long passage, Majd states his affinity to Harlem and Black people in the United States:

Harlem Avenue, for me, was totally different than the rest of New York. The reality is that every street in the city has a particular reputation. When we arrived in the City of Lights in the middle of the 1980s, this was the only place my father could afford. Compared with the other parts of the city, to me Harlem seemed like camps for the displaced in the place we'd just left back then, the American version of Sabra and Shatila, albeit a bit more civilized. This was a street of Black Americans, and I used to laugh thinking that they were New York's Palestinians—the people who perhaps should have been able to be in the American South but had found a spot in the North and made it a home for their tumultuous lives, lives that usually ended up at the bottom of things.⁷

The Black-Palestinian parallel here is made explicit: Harlem Avenue is described as a displaced persons camp, the "American version of Sabra and Shatila." For a book written in Arabic, this is a powerful statement about the racialization of Palestinians in the Lebanese context as much as it is a description of how Black Americans in Harlem live. For the Arabic reader, who is likely to understand Harlem as a segregated community of African Americans, "separate and unequal" to white American neighborhoods, Sabra and Shatila are thus also defined not as part of Beirut and Lebanon, but rather as separate from them. This parallel between Palestinians and Black Americans reminds a Lebanese Arabic-language readership

⁵ Jana Elhassan, *The 99th Floor*, 174. This line closely recalls third world solidarity activist and feminist Radwa Ashour's statement in *The Journey*, her Arabic-language memoir of studying African American poetry in the United States in the 1970s. She speaks of her Black American friends and comrades, "We would mix in their circles...as if we were part of them" (124). The Arabic grammatical particle Ashour uses signifies strongly that they are a part of the same whole.

⁶ Arabic literary texts often invoke Harlem as an iconic and emblematic location of African America, see for example the works of Radwa Ashour, Adonis, Yusuf Idris, Miral al-Tahawy, and others. For a study that discusses some of these works see, Hartman, "Writing Arabs and Africans."

⁷ Elhassan, 172.

that their society excludes Palestinians from its mainstream in ways similar to segregation in other parts of the world—something that is not always acknowledged openly or in the mainstream.

Moreover, Majd draws a parallel between his own experiences of racialization as a Palestinian who once resided in Lebanon, but who now lives in New York City. Blackness therefore symbolizes a kind of home—albeit an incomplete home—for Majd. Here I am discussing Majd's identification and relation both to Black people and their experiences; I am also highlighting the relationship between Majd's identity and Harlem culture in the 1980s, as well as Blackness as a form of racialization. Notably, the location in New York City, wherein Majd and his father manage to fit the best and find some community and solidarity, is strongly coded as Black. We see this in the description of the location of his school and apartment, the characterization of the neighborhood as a "home" for African American people, and Harlem's identification as a refuge for Black people from the whiteness of the surrounding New York neighborhoods. Even as the entire novel proposes that home is a condition and not a place, when Majd and his father do find a place of comfort, it is when Black and Palestinian contexts exist in a positive relationship with each other.

This dialectical relationship between Arabness—here primarily articulated as Palestinianness—and Blackness draws individuals and communities together in *The 99th Floor*. It is thus crucial to understand some of the contours of Palestinian engagements with Blackness, particularly as Arabs, like other racialized groups in the United States, have often refracted their experiences and identities through African Americans in extractive, as well as less exploitative, ways. As Theri Pickens has pointed out in more than one location, what she calls the "circuits of transmission" between Arabs and Blacks in America have been complex and contested over time.⁸ The depth and complexities of these circuits deserve more attention than they have received, as well as models that do not seek to paint them solely as negative and pitted against each other, nor as overromanticized views of sameness. The readings of Blackness and Palestinianness in this article engage with Black Disability scholarship in order to deepen the limited, yet expanding scholarship on intercommunity relations and solidarity-building.⁹ My reading method takes up Pickens's suggestion that placing Black and Arab/Arab American experiences in conversation, and

⁸ Pickens, "Modern," 141.

⁹ Such inter-community relationships in the United States, and also internationally, are long and have undergone many permutations. See the scholarship of Pickens, mentioned above. Other scholars working on these relationships include, Rabab Ibrahim Abdulhadi, Keith Feldman, Sarah Gualtieri, Michelle Hartman, Helen Samhan, and Greg Thomas. Several literary works also engage these relationships in complex ways, the poetry of June Jordan and Suheir Hammad are two important and interconnected examples.

marginalizing the focus on whiteness, means that “Blackness becomes the generative space for loving critique—of Arabness, Blackness, Americanness—since it troubles the ease with which one can accept or endorse the American dream and all that comes with it”.¹⁰ In *The 99th Floor*, the Arabness, Blackness, and Americanness are all deeply engaged with Majd’s impairments and their meaning/s as a disability in these contexts. As he navigates these identities in the search for home as a Palestinian man living in New York, the circuits of transmission between his various identities give them enhanced meanings. The New York context shows him that, in his proximity to and affinity for Black Americans, he is racialized as an Arab and Palestinian. Harlem thus becomes his American home. This in turn helps him understand his home in a Lebanese refugee camp as an inherent part of who he is, inasmuch as Palestine is, though he has never been there. He learns to appreciate these nuances, as his racialized identity as a Palestinian Arab in New York connects back to his racialized Palestinian refugee identity in Beirut.

Living in Harlem, feeling at home among African Americans, and appreciating Black culture impacts Majd, further reinforcing his sense of empowerment as a Palestinian. Black Disability scholarship illuminates how Majd’s racialization is underscored and underlined by his impairments and vice versa, making race and disability mutually constitutive.¹¹ This representation of race and disability as “dynamically informing each other”¹² and deeply intertwined allows for deeper explorations of historical and material connections between disability and other systems of oppression and privilege.¹³ As Sami Schalk has persuasively argued, “disability metaphors need not be either/or (i.e., the representation is either about race or about disability); in fact, they are often both/and, due specifically to the mutually constitutive nature of oppressions.”¹⁴

Reading race and disability together in fiction necessitates thinking through how social stigma works to posit racialized and disabled people as a “problem” that must be fixed or dealt with in society.¹⁵ The character of Majd, as is discussed in depth below, is a good example of how race is always already present in what and who is constructed as abled and disabled according to social norms, when produced in politicized and racialized environments like war.¹⁶ To understand the historical material production of disability for Black and other racialized people,

¹⁰ Pickens, “Modern,” 136.

¹¹ Pickens, “Blue Blackness,” 95-96; Schalk, “Interpreting,” 141.

¹² Pickens, “Blue Blackness,” 95.

¹³ Schalk, “Interpreting,” 141.

¹⁴ “Interpreting” 141.

¹⁵ Bell 1-2, Jarman 19.

¹⁶ Erevelles, *Disability and Difference*, 10; Bailey and Mobley 10-11.

as scholars like Nirmala Erevelles have demanded, it is important to understand the distinction between impairment and disability; it is also important to question some of the ways both are nuanced and problematized in racialized settings and for racialized people.¹⁷

Powerfully arguing against universalist notions of the conditions under which disability is acquired, Erevelles names “oppressive conditions of poverty, economic exploitation, police brutality, neocolonial violence, and lack of access to adequate health care and education.”¹⁸ For Erevelles, the body is the location of impairment, and it is shaped and reshaped by war, political economy, colonialism, and imperialism. How a person moves in society with these impairments determines disability.¹⁹ Referring to the work of Erevelles, Mollow, and others, Pickens summarizes the putative distance between impairment and disability by stating that, “disability takes on a unique narrative texture in communities of color.”²⁰ In the case of Majd, this becomes evident in how he is both disabled and racialized in Lebanon and New York City—in the former as a Palestinian refugee and in the latter, this is amplified by his being an Arab Muslim man more generally. His situation is defined by his material conditions as a child survivor of the 1982 massacre at Sabra and Shatila, the physical and psychological impairments created by the extreme violence of a colonial and imperial war, and his status as a displaced refugee who is read as “other” because of his impairments and his Palestinianness, which become a more generalized otherness in the United States.

Reading *The 99th Floor* in this context compels us to explore Majd's story as personal and psychological, but this is always in dialectical tension with a collective self and community. We can see that for Majd, and, albeit somewhat differently, with David in Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*, the struggle for self and home is personal. It is also deeply felt as a member of a group or groups, systematically divested of individuality and full personhood. This is underlined and reinforced by Majd's racialized status as a Palestinian. Just as the “self” and the home are not merely individualistic or linked to place, the other “irrevocable conditions” shaping them are similarly collective. Majd's narration is told through an individual, first person narration—much of which is interior monologue. Elhassan's narrative explores his interiority and psychology as a person, specifically probing how Majd survives his circumstances as an individual. But the novel is productively understood when his circumstances are linked to how his individuality cannot be expressed, except

¹⁷ Erevelles, *Disability and Difference*, 19-20.

¹⁸ Erevelles, “The Color of Violence,” 119.

¹⁹ Erevelles, *Disability and Difference* and “The Color of Violence.”

²⁰ Pickens, “Blue Blackness,” 96.

insofar as he relates to the collective identity of Palestine, which he needs in order to survive.²¹

The Collective and Emblematic Nature of Black and Palestinian Disability

Majd's memories of childhood and growing up in Shatila before the massacre are free of nostalgia. He narrates the hardships of growing up in an overcrowded refugee camp, along with cherished memories of a loving household, family coherence, and resilience in the face of extreme poverty. However, as depicted in *The 99th Floor*, for much of his adult life, Majd displays an egocentric and selfish concern with his own success at work, his personal comfort in his profoundly troubling relationship at the expense of his female partner, and his general indifference to the well-being of those around him. His refusal to "fix" himself and his impairments—the scar on his face and his serious limp—are also discussed in this context, both in relation to his father, his primary caregiver throughout his childhood until his death, and Hilda, his romantic partner as an adult.

An example of how Majd's inability to care for Hilda is portrayed as physical and emotional emerges when he recalls how he wanted to apologize to her one evening, after demonstrating cruelty towards her: "But when I tried to surrender, to bend my knees out of reverence to her tears, I found myself unable to adapt my body, and I remembered something my father used to always repeat to me, 'Everyone with a disability is also an oppressor.'"²² Majd continues to use his impairment as an excuse for treating Hilda badly. He consistently skips her dance performances, and he will not discuss things of obvious importance to her, including his reasons for not wanting to repair his scars or limp. He also refuses to attend to her emotional needs. This can be read as his own internalized ableism, though he claims pride in his impairments, on one level, he simultaneously uses them to justify his abuse of others and his self-pitying behavior. This links back to the concept of circuits of transmission between Palestinians and African Americans, that have been at times fraught and, in other instances, generative.

In order to read *The 99th Floor* as more than a simple story linking Majd's physical and emotional impairments, and replacing one metaphor with the other, we must move beyond the individualist story of Majd as a selfish person. The larger story of how his impairment and disability define him can be better understood through the collective and emblematic nature of his condition and how he understands it as irrevocable. Majd does not refuse surgery and therapy simply to torture his partner, but also because he feels that becoming able-bodied would mean

²¹ Erevelles, *Disability and Difference*, 56; Jackson 44.

²² Elhassan, 50.

abandoning his role in the collective experiences of Palestinians. As he states very clearly in response to the constant prodding to “improve” his appearance, “Perhaps keeping my scar was a way to say I am from there, from that undefined place. It’s a place whose area grows more constricted and decreases every day. Perhaps, in this way, someday it will unjustly become extinct.”²³ Cassandra Jackson’s study on photographs of people who survived slavery can offer another angle to read Majd’s situation. She has shown that “Because the Black body is never individual, but instead is always the representative of the collective other, the image of the collective Black body extends beyond the singular to become emblematic.”²⁴ Here, I propose reading Majd’s experience in relation to Jackson’s argument about the collective and how it becomes emblematic, even when the violence and resulting impairment deriving from it is also experienced as individual and by individuals.²⁵ Elhassan’s characterization of Majd strongly recalls Jackson’s argument, as Elhassan constructs his body to carry the physical evidence of violence meted out against Palestinians. Majd indeed becomes the embodiment of a massacre that has been emblematic in representing Palestinian suffering.²⁶

Reading his impairments in a historical materialist context, moreover, reminds us to connect Majd’s condition to the very real situations of Palestinians who were impacted by the Sabra and Shatila massacre. As Erevelles cautions, we must neither neglect the problems visited upon the body through violence nor over-pathologize bodies maimed in war.²⁷ Reading *The 99th Floor* this way helps us to understand why Majd insists on keeping his body, including his limp and scar, intact; these impairments allow him to intimately and corporally remember the war, the massacre, his murdered mother and brother, and even who he is as a Palestinian who is racialized in both the Lebanese and American contexts. Keeping his scars and limp are also Majd’s means of resistance when speaking to a world that does not acknowledge him, his people, or the conditions that have led to his suffering. Majd’s experience mirrors, for example, Audre Lorde’s now famous refusal to wear a prosthesis when her breast was removed as a cancer treatment.²⁸ In response to the hospital volunteer who tells her that not wearing a prosthesis was bad for the “morale of the office,” Lorde insists that as a Black woman and a lesbian, her concern should not be to make other patients, or others without cancer, feel

²³ Elhassan, 88.

²⁴ Jackson, 31.

²⁵ Jackson, 31.

²⁶ Rooney and Sakr, 10-11.

²⁷ Erevelles, *Disability and Difference*, 27.

²⁸ Lorde, 15.

comfortable being around her.²⁹ She regards the hospital's efforts to coerce women into wearing such devices as a way to avoid confronting the seriousness of the epidemic of breast cancer.³⁰ In this way, Lorde's analysis provides additional insight about Majd's resistance against fixing his impairments and his efforts to link his individual circumstances to those of the Palestinian collective.

Though, on the surface, Majd often appears selfish, throughout the novel, we observe how he feels connected to and responsible for those who have not found a life outside of the Shatila refugee camp like he did. As an individual, Majd is wealthy and working on the ninety-ninth floor of a New York skyscraper. But his collective identity forbids him from fully enjoying his newfound success primarily because he has left behind a community in Shatila who cannot experience the comfort, luxury, and decent life that he does. This is why he does not alter his body. In fact, we learn that it was not until Hilda came into his life that he could even change his depressing and "dull" apartment:

Even though I had become relatively well off after suffering years of deprivation, I'd never enjoyed sophisticated taste: it's something comfortable people are born with and poor people can't ever acquire...I never realized how dull the house's ambiance was until she changed it. Gloomy olive green and dark brown wood, which overshadowed most parts of the house, were like an extension of my old house—as if I had transported the camp here without meaning to.³¹

Majd unintentionally and unwittingly reproduced the depressing surroundings of the camp in which he grew up, perhaps as a compensation for his distance from these difficult conditions, but also as a reflection of how his traumatic childhood circumstances shaped the parameters of his imagination. Majd holds on to things in life that remind him of Palestinian refugee existence, even as he lives his life away from them.

Majd attributes his inability to enjoy "sophisticated taste" to his impoverished youth, and repeatedly refers to his physical impairments when he talks about this. "There were contradictions in my outward appearance between a man who was marked by war and displacement and the stylish clothes he wore," Majd observes. "I used to see the very same expression on everyone's face: people trying to resist looking at the repulsive scar on my face.... The visitor would then wake from the shock of the scar to focus on my limp and the hushed questioning would increase,"

²⁹ Lorde, 60.

³⁰ Lorde, 65.

³¹ Elhassan, 15.

he continues.³² As Erevelles reminds us, “To put it simply, war is one of the largest producers of disability in a world which is still inhospitable to disabled people and their caregivers most of whom are predominately women (Chang, 2000; Glenn, 1992; Parker 1993).”³³ The traces of war upon Majd are not only produced by the physical violence of war but also structured by his class position. Not all survivors of war are the same, and one’s relative class location has an impact on the way in which people live through war. Erevelles argues that race and disability intersect and are produced by wars that are settler and colonial—which is very much the case with Majd, who never outgrows the violence wrought upon his individual body and on the collective body of Palestinians by the settler colonial state of Israel and its allies. This is compounded by the complexity of his class background and lived experience both as a refugee Palestinian in Lebanon and also upon his move to New York City.

Symbolism, Metaphor, and Material Conditions

Thus far, I have argued for the emblematic and collective nature of disability for Majd as a Palestinian and the political importance of this through a Black Disability Studies lens. The disability metaphor is larger than simply Majd’s characterization and runs throughout the novel in multiple ways, offering powerful symbolic resonance. To unpack further how the metaphor of disability works in *The 99th Floor*, I build on the groundbreaking work of Sami Schalk, who argues that disability metaphors in literary texts by Black authors need not be read as “merely” symbolic or “simply” a reflection of material reality. Using examples from Octavia Butler’s speculative fiction, Schalk shows how disability metaphors boast powerfully symbolic resonance for people who experience interlocking systems of oppression, especially people for whom race and disability weave together in experiencing the world.³⁴ Very few Disability Studies works examine Arab experiences, in fiction or otherwise.³⁵ One reason for this might be similar to the relative lack of studies of Blackness and disability, until recently, since, historically, disability discourses have functioned as a way to “prove” Black people’s inferiority and to pro-

³² Elhassan, 86.

³³ Erevelles, *Disability and Difference*, 132.

³⁴ Schalk, “Interpreting,” 141.

³⁵ The work of Theri Pickens is an exception; she also ties together the studies of Black and Arab American fiction. Abir Hamdar is another example of a scholar working specifically in disability studies and Arabic literature, in her book, *The Female Suffering Body: Illness and Disability in Modern Arabic Literature*. Though her approach does not explicitly engage disability scholarship, Fedwa Malti-Douglas’s work might also be read in this context, for example her work on blindness in *Woman’s Body, Woman’s Word: Gender and Discourse in Arabo-Islamic Writing*, and her work on illness in *Medicines of the Soul: Female Bodies and Sacred Geographies in a Transnational Islam*.

duce anti-Black racism.³⁶ Black Disability scholars take this history into account by focusing on the ways that material and discursive concepts are productive when read together. The focus on the fusing of real bodies and political economy helps to unpack the political nature of both impairments, but also the racializing and disabling narratives that give them meaning in different contexts.³⁷

In *The 99th Floor*, a simplistic metaphorical reading of Majd's scar and limp would regard his impairments as both emblematic of the suffering of the Palestinian people and also as a way to reflect their continued inability to be "whole"—Palestinians are a people lacking self-determination, a nation, and access to their land. His suffering and his deformity could thus be read as a mirror of what is happening to Palestinians in general, while his unpleasantness towards Hilda and others emerged as behavior that represents the natural reactions of one who has been victimized under settler colonialism. In other words, Majd's body is a constant reminder of the scarring impact of a settler colonial nation's attempt to quell the resistance of an oppressed people. But as Schalk warns us, we cannot read such metaphors as symbols of racism alone: "discourses of disability have been used in the name of antiblack racism and because antiblack racism can produce disabling circumstances for black people, representations of disability in African American culture must be interpreted in conjunction with issues of blackness without being abstracted into symbols for the effects of racism alone."³⁸ Thus, it is important not to read symbols and metaphors of disability as standing in for Blackness or racialization, especially when these renderings so often amount to the equation of Black and other racialized identities with what is missing, lacking, or wrong.

Reading the disability metaphor in *The 99th Floor* through this analytical frame reveals some of these dynamics: namely, that while Majd's disability and his racialization impact each other, they cannot be abstracted and cannot be seen as one simply standing in for the other. We see that Majd insists on his scar and limp as irrevocable conditions, and he underlines them as a crucial and central focus of who he is. Though he does speak of his being successful "despite" his disability, he also rejects attempts to separate, hide, or downplay parts of himself. "I always succeeded in giving priority to my image as a successful businessman despite my physical disability," Majd admits. "Perhaps because of this I wanted them both to intersect, so I could preserve my distinctiveness, or in order not to deceive people, for them to know me as I was, in my old skin, not skin fabricated in a medical clinic," he adds.³⁹ Here, his emphasis on skin is important, as we see Majd's resistance

³⁶ Schalk, "Interpreting," 141.

³⁷ Erevelles, *Disability and Difference*.

³⁸ Schalk, 141.

³⁹ Elhassan, 87.

to the notion that something is inferior about his skin—which often serves as a metaphor for race—and claiming all parts of himself as an integrated whole. He cannot be separated from his limp and scar, and he does not wish them to be separated or taken from him. It is also relevant that his scar is on his face, intimately tied to both identity and selfhood.

Another way that we can read the disability metaphor is through Majd's manipulation of facts and his assertion of control over his narrative by telling his own story. In the same section of the book where he talks about his success in business, he also reveals the circumstances under which he is and is not willing to discuss his visible impairments with clients and others at work. He recounts:

Sometimes visitors wouldn't ask what happened to me, but curious people wouldn't leave it alone. I would invent stories, including one that I fell off the balcony at my grandfather's house when I was young, and another that I fell off a motorbike and my face was cut on a broken glass bottle on the ground. I was well-versed in lying and I did it for fun. Other times, when I was in a bleak mood, I would go further and talk about the massacre—how the perpetrators were never held accountable, and then plunge into a long monologue about war and its tragedies until my visitor was bored and uncomfortable.⁴⁰

This example shows that Majd decides when to retain the power to control his story. By refusing to surgically alter his scar, he keeps and insists on his own skin, the literal covering of his body in the first example. In this second passage, Majd's ownership of his physical body is linked to his ownership of his story. Once again, we can read Majd negatively, his stories as manipulative “lies,” but we also can read them as a clever survival strategy that Majd deploys when he is faced with a hostile, racializing, and disabling world. By selectively giving and withholding information about his own body, Majd retains the power to see himself as disabled (or not), which allows him some control over his future.⁴¹

Therefore, in these examples, Majd resists seeing his own impairment as a disability, and uses it to his advantage. In evoking his privileged clients' sense of guilt, he exemplifies how impairment and disability are sutured together especially when they are acquired under politicized conditions.⁴² Majd's resistance as a Palestinian and racialized person in the United States is to exploit this and use it to his social and economic advantage—he becomes a wealthy man in New York City.

⁴⁰ Elhassan, 87.

⁴¹ On disclosures of disability and control over the sharing of information in this context, see Kerschbaum, Eisenman, and Jones, *Negotiating Disability*.

⁴² Erevelles, “The Color of Violence” and *Disability and Difference* and Pickens, “Blue Blackness,” 96.

Gendered Violence, Race, and Disability

As a disabled and racialized man in New York City, Majd manages a range of different manipulations of people and situations. Nowhere is this more striking than in his intimate relationship with his female partner, Hilda. He enacts his political disenfranchisement and disempowerment through his emotional abuse of her. He uses his racialized and disabled identity in relation to his male body to exert his superiority and control over his Christian, Lebanese, and therefore white-coded girlfriend, who is not only able-bodied, but also a dancer.⁴³ Race and disability overdetermine the dynamic of their relationship, since Hilda is an able-bodied, white savior who yearns to rescue the disabled Majd, racialized as a Muslim Palestinian, whose body is always marked by his scar and limp. The contradiction of their relationship resides in her family's membership in the right-wing Christian Phalangist Party, who perpetrated the massacre in which Majd's mother, brother and other Palestinians were killed and in which Majd was maimed. Many of Hilda's savior-like impulses towards Majd are anchored in a sense of guilt, and it is clear that, on some level, he wishes she could "save" him, even as he rejects her. He loves her for wanting to save him, but also punishes her for it and repeatedly acts out a fantasy of rejection and colonial relations—with him rejecting her as the oppressed throwing off the oppressor—even as he engages her. For example, Majd acts out a masculine role that he feels he does not completely inhabit because of his impairments, which, as I argue, allows him to prove to himself that he can be masculine and dominant by being able to seduce Hilda: "That was the heyday of the youth I was trying to recover: that Hilda the Christian woman loved me was my sign of our worth as Palestinians. Love not massacres. This is what excited me the most. The instinctual, primitive side of passion. Except that I was disabled. I didn't seduce her with a complete body, but one missing something. What more than that could make a man like me feel whole? That missing part is what I will use to cleanse the shame."⁴⁴ Majd proves to himself that he is worthy as a man, a Palestinian, and a disabled person—identities that are inextricably linked—because of his relationship with Hilda.

The relationship between Hilda and Majd demonstrates how gender roles and sexuality are expressions of and related to racial and racialized identities. Majd is a man who secures his sense of masculine identity by seducing Hilda, who is Lebanese, thereby connecting his masculinity to his Palestinianness. By refusing to

⁴³ It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore in depth, but her identification as Christian and he, as a Muslim, adds further layers to both their differential racialization and social roles, in both the Lebanese and US contexts. For reading on some of the histories of Arab American racialization in the United States, and how this intersects with religious and sectarian ideas, see Gualtieri, *Between Arab and Black* and Samhan, "Not Quite White."

⁴⁴ Elhassan, 100.

watch her dance, he once again exhibits cruelty and simultaneously plays out his way of expressing masculine domination over her. Additionally, he compensates for his feelings of inadequacy due to his pronounced limp, which disables him. Majd cannot and will not change any of these parts of himself, as they are irrevocable conditions. Moreover, each of these examples demonstrate how race, disability, sexuality, and gender are bound together and mutually constitutive. Majd feels himself to be a coherent person through these identities—specifically as a man who dominates a woman in their sexual relationship and as a disabled person who is impaired in close connection to his racialized identity as a Palestinian.

Majd tries to resist the urge to love Hilda simply because she is his savior and comes from the privileged community that has oppressed his. He feels he cannot love her because of his disability and blames his mistreatment of her on this. He not only treats Hilda badly, but he purposely does things to her precisely because of his desire to be cruel. He avoids her dance performances and makes up excuses that are obvious lies. He ignores her when she speaks directly to him. He refuses to engage her in their living space, among other examples. It is easy to read Majd's treatment of Hilda as abusive and "bad." Though he does often wish he could apologize, as in the scene on page 50 cited above, he often connects his mistreatment of her with descriptions of himself as cruel and evil: "I stood like a superhuman torturer contemplating the grooves of his victims' skin. When I was tired of being evil and fed up with contemplating the torture I could cause her, I wished I could kneel down before those gray spots on her face and ask forgiveness."⁴⁵ Majd uses his privileged gender role to abuse Hilda as a woman, so much that even when she recognizes his suffering as Palestinian and subsequently punishes herself out of guilt for her familial connection to the perpetrators of the massacre, she cannot excuse the way he treats her.

Reading Majd as "bad" or abusive only because he suffers from the after-effects of colonial oppression on his body and psyche is further problematized by the complexities of Hilda. Her character reads as "innocent" compared to his, and she is more easily seen as "good." Also a child during the war, she was shielded from the violence in her community because of her relative privilege as a wealthy, Christian Lebanese girl growing up outside of the city. However, Hilda also enacts her own kind of racialized violence on Majd. *The 99th Floor* subtly shows how Hilda abusively tries to make Majd forgive the perpetrators who murdered his mother and brother without anyone ever having been held accountable for the massacre. She consistently attempts to compel him to "love" her family and become a part of her world. She "naively" fails to understand why Majd might not want to do this.⁴⁶ Hil-

⁴⁵ Elhassan, 50.

⁴⁶ Elhassan, 58.

da simultaneously uses her racialized privilege and the “innocence” of her gender in order to manipulate Majd emotionally.

Reading characters within the binary of good vs. bad is tempting, especially when this seems to be the examination the metaphors call for. Majd’s behavior toward Hilda is shown to be abusive and patriarchal, and within the text, this is regarded as negative, for example. But while this approach provides a neater reading, it is a misguided one. It is a politically dangerous move, as we attend to the complexities of race, disability, gender, and sexuality to limit ourselves to such good-bad readings. Understanding the complexities of Majd and Hilda’s characters beyond this is important not only for the sake of complexity alone, but also because it shows that real lives and real people are impacted by the ways that these complexities intersect every day. The metaphors can help us understand relationship dynamics up to a certain point, but we must also extend our readings beyond them in order to unearth more holistic experiences.

To understand the functioning of disability metaphors beyond the good vs. bad binary, as Schalk proposes in her recent scholarship, we should work to see how characters embody both sides of such an equation, particularly when their experiences are multifold and complex.⁴⁷ Revealing the intersection of these different oppressions in the characters of Majd and Hilda leads us to more complex understandings of the irrevocable conditions they experience. These experiences shift, change, and can be challenged, but they reside within their bodies. Elhassan draws this out eloquently in crafting Majd’s search for home and self. For example, near the end of the novel, Majd contemplates yet another person—his boss—who wants him to “fix” his impairments:

He tried to persuade me to undergo medical treatment: plastic surgery on my face and a procedure to fix my leg. Perhaps my father also would have wanted me to heal the war’s effects on my body, but no one understood what I needed inside myself, because I was still connected to the past. I could stay tied to memories without having to invite in the suffering that pained me every night. I used to know that life was ugly and not beautiful at all. I knew that making myself more attractive would feel to me like extracting the evil part of a story.⁴⁸

Majd expresses that refusing medical treatment is a way to compel himself to feel suffering. He does this in order not to leave behind the problems in life and material conditions that have affected him so profoundly as a Palestinian. Reject-

⁴⁷ Schalk, *Bodyminds*, 24.

⁴⁸ Elhassan, 190.

ing ableist narratives of “fixing” and “healing,” Majd wants to be a living memory of the massacre. For Majd, removing the scar would be like extricating the evil part out of a story, which would render a dishonest and incomplete rendition. The refusal to do so on Majd’s part plays upon the notion that life is “ugly and not beautiful at all.” If we read this through the ability and disability metaphor once again, Majd is the “bad” character, and he at times acknowledges that he acts in ugly ways that he feels match his physical unattractiveness. We can read Majd acting out his abuse on Hilda as a way of proving to her that he is “bad”—he refuses the role of the noble Palestinian, the child victim of a massacre, and the poor disabled man. In a sense, his character is proving that his “badness” must exist because of the evil that is a very real part of the world. However unpleasant it may be at times to read the story through Majd’s perspective as an abusive partner, Elhassan maintains a focus on his perspective for precisely this reason.

One of the complications that Majd faces in his relationship with Hilda is her love for him, coupled with the desire on her part to view him as separate from aspects of himself that he deems to be defining characteristics. Above I have shown how the racialized narrative becomes problematic when Hilda forces her white-coded identity upon him, insisting that he must love her family, despite their affiliation with the people who murdered his family in an act of extreme racialized violence. Similarly, she attempts to convince him to “fix” his impairments. This context helps us to understand why he also then resists her supposedly “pure” love for him, apart from his identities: “I was no longer a Palestinian or a man, or even a disabled person or anything at all. She loved only Majd. And this Majd confused me when he stood alone, apart from all of those identities. This was a challenge or a new birth that I resisted.”⁴⁹

On the surface, this articulation of Hilda’s love for Majd could be read as a possible liberation from identities that constrain him from being himself. However, even though his conditions sometimes challenge him, and he expresses this, Majd continually shows us that his identities are not only about himself as an individual, but also have the weight of a collective people and history behind them. He has felt pain and suffering because of who he is, both as a Palestinian and as a person who survived a massacre with visible bodily traces. Moreover, these identities have also given him power and strength to resist his erasure and oppression. For Majd, therefore, an individual identity without a collective identity is frightening and impossible.

⁴⁹ Elhassan, 158.

Conclusions: Moving Toward Home

Majd comes to terms with his contradictory feelings and identities throughout the narration of *The 99th Floor*, and we can read these as irrevocable conditions in conversation with James Baldwin's notion that overcodes this novel. Majd's home in Palestine is as much inside of him as it is a place located physically to the south of Lebanon, the country where he grew up. Palestine is also symbolized by his Harlem apartment, in which he unwittingly re-creates the depressing and impoverished conditions of the Shatila refugee camp. To make sense of himself—and find his “living room,” to invoke June Jordan—Majd must come to terms with all of the irrevocable conditions that make him who he is: his home, his impairment and disability, his racialization, his identity as a man, and how these all co-constitute his sense of self. I evoke June Jordan's poetry in this conclusion to help us understand how Majd has “less and less living room,” and it is time for him to make his way home.⁵⁰

It is not by chance that Jordan's “Moving Towards Home” is one of the iconic poems of Black-Palestinian solidarity, nor that Jordan's search for living room “against the relentless laughter of evil,” is pronounced in the aftermath of the same massacre in which Majd's mother and brother were murdered. It is in this poem that she declares the lines: “I was born a Black woman/and now/ I am become a Palestinian.”⁵¹ In Jordan's powerful words of solidarity, we understand that despite suggestions, you can't revoke Palestine, Blackness, disability, and sexuality. Jordan declares herself a Black woman and a Palestinian because she knows that your sense of self and your identity are integral to understanding who you are. Your body and self are both your home, and her poem bears its title for this reason.

My readings in this article suggest that *The 99th Floor* allows us to probe some of the complexities of how race and racialization, impairment and disability, and gender and sexuality are always in dialogue and mutually constitutive. At moments, in discussions of migration and movement as positive, impairment as repairable, and love as a solution to trauma, it seems that perhaps some conditions might possibly be revocable. However, whether they are acquired by military occupation, racialization, war, or a specific massacre, race and disability are not revocable for Majd. Indeed, in his explicit and implicit rejections of these possibilities, we see the condition of home laid bare. Near the end of the novel he asks, “Did love do all of this to me? Could it become a homeland? I do not know.”⁵² Majd does not know if love can be a homeland, but he suggests strongly that the answer to the question of locating a home and homeland lies firmly and deeply within himself.

⁵⁰ Jordan, 134.

⁵¹ Jordan, 134.

⁵² Elhassan, 220.

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**“Don’t nobody wanna be locked up”:
The Black Disabled Veteran in Toni Morrison’s *Sula* and August
Wilson’s *Fences*¹**

Delia Steverson

War operates as a central theme in the vast literature that the novelist Toni Morrison and playwright August Wilson have produced. While framing specific historical moments in U.S. History, Wilson uses war as a backdrop in many of the plays contained in *The American Century Cycle*.² For example, war looms large in the background of *Jitney*, which features veterans of the Vietnam and Korean Wars. Additionally, published in 1984 as an ode to African American life in that decade, *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* centers on the lives of formerly enslaved people and their descendants, and their struggles seeking new opportunities in the North decades after the Civil War.

Toni Morrison also is concerned with the aftermath of war and its traumatic effects on Black individuals and communities. *Home* (2012), Morrison’s tenth novel, follows the journey of Frank Money, an African American Korean War veteran with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), likely a direct consequence of his service in an integrated army, and who returns to the United States only to battle segregation at home. Additionally, in order to foreground the numerous gender, racial, and community conflicts interwoven throughout the final installment of her trilogy chronicling African American history, Morrison originally floated the title *War*, but she instead opted for the title *Paradise*.³ Throughout their work, both authors emphasize war as one of the pivotal historical epicenters in which rich representations of African American history and cultural experiences emerge.

Two texts, Morrison’s novel *Sula* (1973) and Wilson’s play *Fences* (1986), link specific political and economic problems in the United States to consequences of the war experience abroad, such as issues of rehabilitation and reentry, commodification, profiteering, and racial discrimination. *Sula* tells the story of friendship, love, betrayal, and growth between Sula Peace and Nel Wright, two residents of “The Bottom,” a small, tight-knit Black community in Medallion, Ohio. Through

¹ I’d like to thank my colleagues from the “Global Histories of Disability” NEH Summer Institute for their guidance and support as well as Dr. Trudier Harris for tirelessly reading multiple drafts of this project.

² Wilson charged himself with the goal of writing a play for every decade in the 20th century as a way to chronicle African American life and they are collectively called *The American Century Cycle*.

³ This trilogy would have included *Beloved* (1987) and *Jazz* (1992). James Marcus, “This Side of Paradise: An Interview with Toni Morrison.”

a lively and colorful cast of characters that anchors *Sula*, the novel also illuminates the circular history of the town and its inhabitants as they not only confront hardships and tragedy, but also pursue joy, communal healing, and survival. Set in 1950s Pittsburgh, *Fences* centers the life of Troy Maxson, a sanitation worker and ex-baseball player, as he struggles to provide for his family and come to terms with his town's racist past. Both the novel and the play feature Black male characters who become physically and psychologically injured as a result of war. Each text emphasizes the ways in which American democracy has failed Black and disabled persons; thus, by chronicling the local Black community's communal, institutional, and individual responses to these failures, the author's literary representations served to highlight the material concerns of disabled Black veterans historically. As Jennifer James maintains in her insightful work regarding African American war literature, Black Americans engage the subject of war in two ways: 1) to demonstrate how the United States is a nation "made by war"; and 2) to indict the United States as inherently violent, citing racial injustice as a "narrative of racial strife, a war within a war."⁴ In *Sula* and *Fences*, several secondary characters help to reveal the ways in which African American authors engage the subject of war along these modes of reasoning, though most scholars have primarily focused their attention on the more central characters. In the following essay, I contend that, by centralizing these secondary roles in the texts, not only do Morrison and Wilson adopt the two modes that James describes, they also help to expose the failures of American democracy and the trauma and pain of both the individual and collective Black psyche.

Through writing history as fiction, Wilson and Morrison situate a litany of voices that represent the varied and multi-layered aspects of African American life during times of war, including specifically, the experience of Black disabled veterans. In *Sula*, Morrison creates Shadrack, a socially marginalized World War I veteran who has experienced the intense trauma of witnessing violence and death while fighting in France. Upon his return home, he institutes "National Suicide Day" as an attempt to control the uncertainty and fear of death. Consequently, the townspeople of the Bottom of Medallion, Ohio, the all-Black community where Shadrack resides, classify the veteran as "crazy" and "energetically mad."⁵ Morrison's construction of Shadrack serves as a precursor to her construction of Money in *Home*, in which she describes the "image of a shellshocked veteran from [her] hometown, who walked up and down the streets in military garb, shouting" as inspiration for her character.⁶ Although Shadrack is a marginalized character,

⁴ Jennifer James, *A Freedom Bought with Blood: African American War Literature from the Civil War to World War II*, 9.

⁵ Toni Morrison, *Sula*, 15, 173. For more on the function of language in theorizing and analyzing Blackness and madness, see Therí Pickens *Black Madness: Mad Blackness* (2019).

⁶ Abigail Meisel, "Words and War: Toni Morrison at West Point."

Morrison acknowledges that she envisioned him to compliment the titular character, Sula: "Well, in the first place, with Shadrack, I just needed, wanted, a form of madness that was clear and compact to bounce off of Sula's strangeness...there's a connection between the two of them. And I wanted the town to respond to him in one way and to her in another. They're both eccentrics, outside the law."⁷ Shadrack exhibits traits that threaten to unravel the tightness of those residing in The Bottom, while Sula's unpredictability and mischievousness wreak havoc among the citizens of The Bottom, leading to their designation as the town's pariahs. The fact that Shadrack is so closely linked to Sula indicates that this periphery character warrants more rigorous scholarly attention.

Likely drawing upon his experiences serving briefly in the military in 1962, in *Fences*, Wilson marshals a similar literary device as Morrison. The play focuses more centrally on Troy Maxon, and his brother Gabriel also emerges as an important character. After being injured in World War II, Gabriel is forced to live with a metal plate in his head and believes he is the Archangel Gabriel. His behavior promises a deleterious impact on his family, especially Troy, who serves as Gabriel's narrative mouthpiece. While struggling to provide for his family amid racial discrimination in Pittsburgh during the 1950s and 1960s, Troy concedes that he "can't make [Gabriel] get well," though he recognizes the damaging effects of war on soldiers and therefore attempts to be Gabriel's main advocate for care.⁸ In a 1993 interview with Sandra Shannon, Wilson remarks that although Gabriel serves as a "spectacle character" for the audience, "It would make [Wilson] mad when [he] read the reviews and they would refer to Gabriel as an idiot or some other kind of description without making reference to the fact that this man had suffered this wound fighting for...country...."⁹ In fact, Wilson's defense of Gabriel's construction as mad serves as important motivation for examining these characters as disabled veterans. First, Wilson rejects the dismissal or oversimplification of injured war veterans as merely intellectually deficient. Secondly, Gabriel's positioning in *Fences*, along with Shadrack's characterization in *Sula*, signify how "desperately malignant the realm of war can be" by demonstrating how war itself *creates* wounded minds and bodies, as Morrison concluded.¹⁰ Third, by situating Shadrack's and Gabriel's plights in an historical as well as an ethical and sociocultural context, both Morrison and Wilson emphasize the challenges injured war veterans face when transitioning from their position as soldiers to civilians.

⁷ Robert Stepto, "'Intimate Things in Place': A Conversation with Toni Morrison," 483.

⁸ August Wilson, *Fences*, 27.

⁹ Sandra Shannon, "Blues, History, and Dramaturgy: An interview with August Wilson," 552.

¹⁰ Meisel, "Words and War."

The Failures of Rehabilitation

Both Shadrack's and Gabriel's experiences with combat underscore the damaging consequences of war to the physical, emotional, and psychological well-being of soldiers. Shadrack first appears in the chapter "1919," where the narrator recounts Shadrack's experience fighting in France during World War I. During his first encounter in battle in 1917, Shadrack and his company were met with "shouts and explosions."¹¹ Amid the chaos, Shadrack is wounded by a nail that pierces his foot, and while he is running for cover, he looks over his shoulder only to see the "face of a soldier near him fly off."¹² Wincing in pain and surrounded by death and destruction, Shadrack struggles to comprehend the intense situation: "Shellfire was all around him, and though he knew that this was something called *it*, he could not muster up the proper feeling—the feeling that would accommodate *it*. He expected to be terrified or exhilarated—to feel *something* very strong."¹³ Morrison's use of the pronoun *it* without an antecedent reveals that both the physical and psychological pain that Shadrack experiences is not just unnamed, but incapable of a literal description. This mediating through language is precisely what Elaine Scarry argues is the "unsharability" of a body in pain "through its resistance to language" and establishes how Shadrack's experience resists being named.¹⁴ The disabling effects of war produce a permanent impairment in Shadrack's mind that leaves him so "blasted and permanently astonished" that the townspeople of Medallion often wondered what he must have been like before the war.¹⁵ Shadrack's experience on the battlefield reveals how war inherently *produces* disability.

Likewise, in *Fences*, although Gabriel's experience in World War II is not dramatized, the description of Gabriel in the first act evokes wounds comparable to Shadrack's: "Injured in World War II, he has a metal plate in his head. He carries an old trumpet tied around his waist and believes with every fiber of his being that he is the Archangel Gabriel."¹⁶ Shadrack and Gabriel, whose bodies were physically marred and whose minds were psychologically altered, *become* disabled as a result of war, echoing Nirmala Erevelles' conceptualization of disability, where she situates disability not as "'being' but of 'becoming,' and this 'becoming' is an historical event."¹⁷ Erevelles foregrounds the body in her theorization of disability, which

¹¹ Morrison, *Sula*, 7.

¹² Morrison, *Sula*, 8.

¹³ Morrison, *Sula*, 7.

¹⁴ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, 4.

¹⁵ Morrison, *Sula*, 7.

¹⁶ Wilson, 25.

¹⁷ Nirmala Erevelles, "Crippin' Jim Crow: Disability, Dis-Location, and the School-to-Prison Pipeline," 85.

warrants expansion for my analysis because her theory works to connect disability and materiality of the body.

In considering the historical violence of war and the complex relationships between race, gender, and disability that both texts raise, I find Erevelles' conception of disability particularly insightful. Historically, war has also produced mutilated, maimed, and dismembered bodies that are commodified in a transnational context. In *Disability and Context*, Erevelles' historical, materialist reading of disability invokes Hortense Spillers' conceptualization of a theory of the flesh in order to situate disability not just as "irregular and contingent effect of shifting signifiers," but "to engage materiality at the level of the body...by which the body becomes a commodity of exchange in a transnational economic context."¹⁸ Erevelles challenges the radical posthumanist aesthetic of disability, which seeks to reject disability as lack, loss, or abject, and imagines a transformative politic that situates disability as desirable. Instead, Erevelles questions the potential of such a politic as transformative when such disability is produced under the historical violence of transnational capitalism, including slavery. She asserts that the scenes of mutilation and dismemberment of Black bodies that Spillers details in her essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" "produce disabled bodies—black disabled bodies—who in an ironic turn are transformed into commodities that are exchanged in the market for profit."¹⁹ Because of this material assault, Erevelles asks, "How does one celebrate in the face of so much violated and wounded flesh?"²⁰ While I am careful not to equate the transnational economic context of slavery to the political and economic context of war, I do maintain that analyzing the historical conditions of both Shadrack's and Gabriel's war experiences and the process by which war produced disabled bodies is key to understanding how race and disability are conceptualized in both texts.

The disabled body as commodity is revealed through Gabriel's and Shadrack's reentries into society. Their treatments under federally- and state-sanctioned programs underscore the historical evolution of veterans' rehabilitation programs and pension systems from World War I to the post-World War II period. After World War I and under the auspices of the Bureau of War Risk Insurance and the Federal Board of Vocational Education, among others, Congress began to introduce legislation that would provide benefits to disabled veterans. Although there was much conflict over the meaning of *disability*, disabled war veterans were often given a special disability status, distinguishing them from the larger category of disabled, who were viewed in the 1920s and 1930s in popular culture as a burden on society.

¹⁸ Nirmala Erevelles, *Disability and Difference in Global Contexts: Enabling a Transformative Body Politic*, 27, 29.

¹⁹ Erevelles, *Disability and Difference*, 38.

²⁰ Erevelles, *Disability and Difference*, 42.

Provisions for disabled veterans were guided by principles of the Progressive Era, which championed the “shared responsibility of individuals, employers, and the state in ameliorating the impact of industrial capitalism and industrial warfare on families.”²¹ The goals of rehabilitation and federal assistance were aimed toward aiding disabled veterans in becoming productive citizens upon their reentry into society. Compensation and rehabilitation depended on physicians and sometimes laymen, who decided which veterans were “deserving” or “underserving” of care. Signs of psychological distress were particularly marked because they were deemed easy to feign. The fields of psychology and neurology were in their infancy, so as historian Walter Hickel points out, “Mental impairment...was not exclusively a clinical condition, to be established only by a medical specialist, but a deviation from accepted norms of social behavior and self-discipline that laymen could gauge as well.”²² Furthermore, because medical professionals often relied not only on scientific evidence, but also misconceptions about race, the question of whose bodies and minds were salvageable was often delineated through racial and cultural narratives.²³ African Americans were said to be genetically predisposed to certain diseases such as tuberculosis, and physicians would often dismiss symptoms of an impairment stemming from war in favor of attributing it to “congenital weakness, low standards of personal hygiene, or moral degradation.”²⁴ This line of reasoning also served as the rationale for the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment, where, during the post-World War I era, the prevailing thought emanating out of the medical community was that African Americans responded differently to diseases than whites. Hundreds of Black men were recruited to participate in a study that was said to treat “bad blood,” an umbrella term used to include numerous ailments such as syphilis, fatigue, and anemia. Likewise, because medical professionals were only just beginning to recognize psychological disorders, such as epilepsy or shell shock, Bureau physicians often suspected their patients of malingering, since some psychiatric disorders were linked to the pathology of venereal disease, like syphilis.²⁵ As with the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment, which led to the unethical and immoral neglect and mistreatment of hundreds of Black men with syphilis, these misconceptions about race and health had material consequences for Black disabled veterans seeking care, as many were ignored, misdiagnosed, or neglected.

²¹ Walter Hickel, “Medicine, Bureaucracy, and Social Welfare: The Politics of Disability Compensation for American Veterans of World War I,” 236.

²² Hickel, 251.

²³ Paul Lawrie, “‘Salvaging the Negro’: Race, Rehabilitation, and the Body Politic in World War I American, 1917-1924,” 323.

²⁴ Hickel, 237.

²⁵ Hickel, 250.

U.S. newspapers projected an image of rehabilitation services that commended private donors, state and federal agencies, and the American Red Cross for working to build facilities that strove to provide a “paradise for the soul-weary men from the front.”²⁶ Yet, as Shadrack’s encounter with the state reveals, the Black disabled veteran often experienced anything but paradise. The narrative does not disclose what happens to Shadrack immediately following his traumatizing experience on the battlefield; instead, the very next scene begins with Shadrack opening his eyes, unaware of where he is; he can only detect that he is propped up in a small bed, with a large tin plate of unappetizing rice, meat, and tomatoes placed before him. After having a frightening response to imagining his hands growing monstrously in size, Shadrack is distracted by the voice of a “balding man dressed in a green-cotton jacket and trousers” commanding him to eat his food: “Private? We’re not going to have any trouble today, are we? Are we, Private? ... Come on. Pick up that spoon. Pick it up, Private. Nobody is going to feed you forever.”²⁷ Violently, the attendant grabs Shadrack’s hand from under the cover in an effort to make him eat. In a panic, Shadrack attempts to remove the nurse’s hand and accidentally overturns the tray. As a result, he is confined to a straitjacket.

As this scene with Shadrack implies, the reality of rehabilitation for some wounded Black veterans was far bleaker than the national narrative of care surrounding white World War I veterans. This encounter emphasizes the often-involuntary commitment of war veterans in a system where African Americans, especially, are not given adequate care. In her study on the experiences of African American soldiers and World War I, Jennifer Keene describes the rehabilitation process in the following terms for Black soldiers: “Under constant threat of physical violence,” whether they “complain[ed] about the long waits to see specialists,” or if they demanded fair treatment, they could be placed into solitary confinement or even beaten “with cakes of soap put in socks.”²⁸

This environment of fear exacerbates and prolongs the violent repercussions of war. The white nurse’s reaction to Shadrack not only shows this fear, but his response also underscores the healing tactics used in transforming the disabled veteran into an independent, productive citizen. Shadrack sees the food as unappetizing, yet the nurse reads his undesirable impetus to touch the food as a sign of his being unable to feed himself, an indicator of his failed body. The nurse does not ask Shadrack why he refuses to eat the food, but instead favors a misreading of

²⁶ Annessa Stagner, “Healing the Soldier, Restoring the Nation: Representations of Shell Shock in the USA during and after the First World War,” 261-262.

²⁷ Morrison, *Sula*, 9.

²⁸ Jennifer Keene, “The Long Journey Home: African American World War I Veterans and Veterans’ Policies,” 159.

Shadrack's body as incapable of performing what he sees as a basic task essential to completing the rehabilitation process.

The phrase, "Nobody is going to feed you forever," has a dual meaning. First, it speaks literally to Shadrack's present situation—the nurse warns Shadrack that there is a finite ending to this rehabilitation. Second, it connects to larger conversations about social welfare and government-sponsored aid. The nurse's tone perpetuates the idea that disabled veterans should not rely on government aid, but should opt for "autonomy before charity" and subscribe to the "pick yourself up by the bootstraps" mentality and rehabilitate themselves.²⁹ Failing to feed himself, Shadrack, therefore, fails in his duty to become independent. By misreading the situation, the nurse can now shift the blame of Shadrack's failed rehabilitation from being indicative of the failure of the veterans' care system to Shadrack's own individual shortcomings. This rhetorical shift in blame from larger systems onto the individual mirrors how patients of the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment were told that the failure to cure syphilis was not because of the medicine itself, but that the cause of their bodily failing was genetic and related to "bad blood." Shadrack's brief encounter at the hospital demonstrates how violence and racism short-circuits his potential to become fully rehabilitated.

Furthermore, Shadrack's involuntary confinement sheds light on the relationship between disability, incarceration, and the failures of rehabilitation for Black male veterans in the aftermath of World War I. One day, because of a "memorandum from the hospital executive staff in reference to the distribution of patients in high-risk areas," Shadrack is released from the hospital due to a "demand for space."³⁰ Therefore, because of Shadrack's earlier "violent" episode with the orderly, Shadrack is thrown out of the hospital with only "\$217 in cash, a full suit of clothes and copies of very official-looking papers," and nowhere to go.³¹ Shadrack's abrupt dismissal emphasizes how the medical community wondered if they should attempt to continue to spend resources to rehabilitate a group they deemed "unsalvageable" or if "the state should simply 'cut the colored man loose' and let the dysgenic natures of war and industry finally do away with 'the burdensome Negro problem.'"³² Shadrack is indeed seen as unsalvageable and, as a result, is cut loose. With no support system, Shadrack is simply dumped onto the street, where he wanders around, spends his money at the nearest liquor store, cries, gets drunk, and passes out on the side of the road. The police find him and imprison him for vagrancy and intoxication.

²⁹ Lawrie, 337.

³⁰ Morrison, *Sula*, 10.

³¹ Morrison, *Sula*, 10.

³² Lawrie, 337.

Disability Studies scholar Liat Ben-Moshe's work connecting disability with an analysis of incarceration provides a useful context to consider the multivalent, complex stratums that work to trap Shadrack in a series of confinements. Ben-Moshe argues that "analyzing imprisonment from a disability studies lens will necessitate a closer look at the social and economic conditions of disablement and incarceration rather than looking at disability as a cause for criminal acts."³³ By conceptualizing incarceration as a "continuum and multi-faceted phenomenon," including a variety of confinements, such as prisons, psychiatric hospitals, and rehabilitation and treatment centers, among others, Ben-Moshe underscores the often cyclical treatment of confinement, where bodies marked deviant often fall victim.³⁴ Therefore, considering how capitalism, racism, and ableism work in this context to mark certain bodies as criminal uncovers the nuances of Shadrack's institutionalization, as opposed to reading Shadrack's vagrancy and intoxication as an isolated incident legitimating his arrest. As Ben-Moshe explains, many policy-makers believe that people with disabilities place a strain on the economy, which justifies Shadrack's release.³⁵ Shadrack's mental difference, combined with the marking of his body as violent, resulted not in rehabilitative justice and integration into the community, but instead his body is judged as disposable—unworthy of adequate care.

Shadrack's treatment at the hands of the state is not an isolated incident, for Gabriel likewise finds himself in a cycle of institutionalization. Like Shadrack, Gabriel is hospitalized for rehabilitation, although it is not dramatized. At the beginning of the play's second act, authorities arrest Gabriel for disturbing the peace. After bailing Gabriel out of jail, Troy explains to Rose that some kids were teasing Gabriel, and he chased them home "howling and carrying on," which prompted onlookers to call the police.³⁶ Although this is the only specific incident that is recounted, Troy reveals that Gabriel has been jailed six or seven times for transgressing what is deemed as "acceptable behavior," while also disclosing that Gabriel is under constant surveillance. Gabriel's treatment at the hands of the state magnifies the hyper-surveillance of disabled veterans of war in a society that constantly reifies and reinforces what is constituted as acceptable behavior. His disability status serves as justification for the arrests. The psychologically-wounded veteran is even more vulnerable, as Gabriel's case demonstrates when, after this incident, the judge orders a hearing to decide if Gabriel should be re-committed to the hospital.

³³ Liat Ben-Moshe, "Disabling Incarceration: Connecting Disability to Divergent Confinements in the USA," 397.

³⁴ Ben-Moshe, "Disabling Incarceration," 385.

³⁵ Liat Ben-Moshe, "'The Institution Yet to Come': Analyzing Incarceration through a Disability Lens," 136.

³⁶ Wilson, 65.

Troy connects veterans' hospitals to other forms of incarceration, which he emphasizes during an argument with Rose about the judge's orders. While Rose posits that, potentially, the hospital would be a good place for Gabriel, Troy disagrees fervently: "The man done had his life ruined fighting for what? And they wanna take and lock him up. Let him be free. He don't bother nobody."³⁷ Troy expresses the hypocrisy in having individuals venture off to war to fight for freedom, only to be rewarded with prison. He does not recognize the hospital as a place of care, but a prison that punishes those whom it has been charged to protect. While Rose deems state interference as a benevolent course of action for Gabriel, Troy insists the state does more harm than good, and therefore, the best place for Gabriel is in the community. Gabriel's cycle of institutionalization reveals what Ben-Moshe asserts are the capitalist and racist impetuses that work to sustain the prison-industrial complex.³⁸ By molding men of color into commodities in the growing industry, the prison proposes a solution to one of the problems of capitalism by both "maintain[ing] a proletariat class (in this case mostly poor people of color), while controlling them from rising up against their conditions of being."³⁹ Therefore, by ensuring Gabriel is trapped in a cycle of institutionalization, the prison succeeds in "the making of docile bodies and an underclass to imprison," a point that Troy understands and attempts to resist.⁴⁰

Reentering Civilian Life

The damage from war and the trauma from institutionalization affect both Gabriel's and Shadrack's reentries into the community. Shadrack receives no welcoming party—no friends or family awaiting his arrival to hear his war stories or applaud his valor for serving his country. Rather, after he is released from prison, Shadrack is heaped onto a wagon and dropped off at a shack on the riverbank on the outskirts of the community. Shadrack's physical location emphasizes his figurative role in the community as a disabled veteran—a marginal of the marginal. The townspeople were at first frightened of Shadrack and "knew [he] was crazy," but once they "understood the boundaries and nature of his madness, they could fit him, so to speak, into the scheme of things."⁴¹ Throughout the novel, no one initiates a conversation with Shadrack. He is never fully integrated into society, since "nobody would have him in or even near their homes."⁴² Shadrack's mental differ-

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 65.

³⁸ Ben-Moshe, "The Institution Yet to Come," 136.

³⁹ Ben-Moshe, "The Institution Yet to Come," 137.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁴¹ Morrison, *Sula*, 15.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 155.

ence as a result of war and repeated incarceration adversely affects his involvement in the community, further instituting him as a pariah in Medallion.

Unlike the citizens of Medallion who have little interest in fully integrating Shadrack into the community, Gabriel is slightly more included into society. After moving out of Troy's house, Gabriel rents a room in the basement of Miss Pearl, a neighborhood friend. Family and friends surround Gabriel, working together to care for his needs. For example, when Miss Pearl notices that Gabriel had not been eating lately, she tells Troy's wife, Rose, who on several occasions during the play, offers to cook for Gabriel, encouraging him to eat her biscuits and sandwiches. However, while Gabriel is more intricately connected to the fabric of the community than Shadrack, he is not thoroughly embraced. Troy generally tolerates Gabriel and, at times, sees him as a burden. Lyons, Troy's oldest son, indulges Gabriel. For example, when Gabriel enters during one of Troy's and Lyons's conversations about money, Lyons asks Gabriel how he has been, and Gabriel responds, "Oh I been chasing hellhounds and waiting on the time to tell St. Peter to open the gates."⁴³ Lyons retorts, "Somebody got to chase them."⁴⁴ Even though Lyons does not refute Gabriel's claim that he is the Archangel Gabriel, his remark is still condescending. Furthermore, Rose infantilizes Gabriel, and she, unlike Lyons, does not engage with Gabriel in that manner, but sticks to the task at hand, encouraging Gabriel to eat. Gabriel is not completely accepted, but his family and Miss Pearl do understand that his difference is a result of war injury and work to incorporate him into the community.

Although Gabriel's family and community cautiously work to incorporate him into both the domestic and public sphere, Gabriel's status as a Black disabled veteran proves to be a more vexed subject position politically, economically, and socially. As his multiple arrests show, even though Gabriel can move freely in and out of spaces in the community, it is not without boundaries. As the title of the play suggests, fences become boundaries and limits not only ascribed to Troy, but also highlights Gabriel's boundaries, as well. There are material consequences for Gabriel in transgressing those boundaries, as he is constantly institutionalized, but there are also economic consequences for Gabriel's transgressions. Troy tells Rose that every time Gabriel is arrested, he must pay \$50 to have Gabriel released. He resents the fact that when the police and state officials "see [him] coming they stick out their *hands*."⁴⁵ Troy blames war for creating these wounded bodies and minds, and the state for neglecting proper rehabilitation, as well as for profiting from the surveillance and punishment of the wounded minds and bodies. Gabriel's treat-

⁴³ Wilson, 47.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁴⁵ Wilson, 60. His emphasis.

ment at the hands of the state demonstrates the potential profitability of racialized and disabled bodies and minds.

Pensions, Profits, and Black Masculinity

Not only do Gabriel's transgressions become profitable for the state, but his disability status elicits financial repercussions for his family as well, as Troy concedes:

TROY. Don't nobody wanna be locked up, Rose. What you wanna lock him up for? Man go over there and fight the war...messin' around with them Japs, get half his head blown off...and they give him a lousy three thousand dollars. And I had to swoop down on that.

ROSE. Is you fixing to go into that again?

TROY. That's the only way I got a roof over my head...cause of that metal plate.⁴⁶

Troy critiques the government's system of pensions for wounded war veterans by rationalizing that there is no monetary value that would compensate for the immense damage Gabriel suffered from the war. Yet, at the same time, he recognizes that it is indeed those funds that help support Troy and his family, since it is Gabriel's pension that allows Troy to make a down payment on a house. Because the state profits off of Gabriel's arrests, and Troy and his family benefit from his pension, Gabriel's war injuries become commodified at the expense of his well-being.⁴⁷ This commodification is further exhibited when Gabriel is finally recommitted to the hospital. After Rose and Troy separate for six months due to Troy's philandering with Alberta, Rose breaks her silence to inform Troy that with Troy's permission, Gabe has been recommitted to the hospital: "Say the government send part of his check to the hospital and the other part to you."⁴⁸ Gabriel himself is not given a choice. None of the power-wielding entities (the state, Troy, or Rose) includes Gabriel in any conversations regarding his own fate.

Additionally, the topic of Gabriel's pension underscores a potential threat to the social hierarchy that privileges white heterosexual males by giving Gabriel and his family the potential to improve their social standing. As Paul Lawrie maintains, historically, many officials who were responsible for providing veteran benefits like the Federal Board of Vocational Education (FBVE) after World War I "recognized that benefits paid to black veterans could potentially undermine white dominance

⁴⁶ Ibid., 27-28.

⁴⁷ Stacie McCormick makes a similar argument in her insightful reading of Gabriel as anti-spectacle. See McCormick 71-72.

⁴⁸ Wilson, 75.

rooted in income distribution, regional labor markets, and citizenship rights.”⁴⁹ Gabriel's metal plate serves a type of social currency that allows economic mobility for the Maxsons. Therefore, criminalizing Gabriel's Blackness and his war wounds serves as an impetus to upholding the status quo.

Gabriel's position as both a burden and provider for Troy and his family upsets the notions of traditional Black masculinity that Troy espouses. Keith Clark defines this type of masculinity as “a socially oriented conception of gender informed by society's obdurate figurations of manhood—ones rooted in strength, power, authority, and heterosexuality.”⁵⁰ Gabriel's disability status allows the Maxsons special access to housing that, during a decidedly segregated moment in the 1950s and 1960s, would have proven to be difficult, otherwise. Gabriel, then, is able to provide for the family in a way that Troy cannot. Troy is resentful of the fact that he is not an independent provider, even though as the events with Gabriel's arrests and subsequent institutional commitment in *Fences* demonstrate, Black men's attempts to perform and live up to such rigid notions of patriarchal masculinity in an anti-Black racist society can prove damaging and destructive. For example, although Troy charges himself with being the primary caregiver for Gabriel, independent of governmental interference, he ultimately fails at protecting Gabriel. Rose lambastes Troy for going “back on [himself]” by allowing Gabriel to be committed after he has fought so long for Gabriel to remain in the community.⁵¹ However, Troy vehemently denies the accusation, instead insisting that he thought he only signed a release form: “Hell, I can't read, I don't know what they had on that paper! I ain't signed nothing about sending Gabe away.”⁵² In this instance, Wilson makes known the connections between Black masculinity and intelligence. Not willing to expose himself as illiterate, which as Troy knows would then affirm pre-conceived notions of Black men as unintelligent, he elects to maintain his pride by feigning literacy. Yet, when he realizes the consequences of his performance, he sees his failure to read as a product of his failure as a man. Although it bruises Troy's ego, this decision, whether intentional or accidental, has long-term consequences for Gabriel, as he is at the mercy of both Troy and the state.

The Problem of the Black Disabled Veteran

Through the characters Shadrack and Gabriel, Morrison and Wilson underscore the pathologizing of Black, wounded war veterans and explore how the Black wounded war veteran presents a problem in a society that values able-bodiedness

⁴⁹ Lawrie, 329-330.

⁵⁰ Keith Clark, *Black Manhood in James Baldwin, Ernest J. Gaines, and August Wilson*, 2.

⁵¹ Wilson, 75.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 75.

and independence, while eschewing disability and Blackness. These narratives demonstrate how disability can serve as justification for oppression, even when that disability is directly caused by demonstrating one's patriotism to their country. Their plights spotlight the disabling effects of racialized violence, wherein the state justifies its actions, imprisoning Shadrack and Gabriel because of pre-discursive narratives about both Blackness and disability that lead to imagined perceptions of the veterans as inherently criminal. Additionally, while their complex functioning in the narratives mirrors the complexities that Black veterans encountered historically, Gabriel's and Shadrack's literary portrayals present ethical and sociocultural implications with representing disabled characters in African American literature.

Here, it is useful to return to Wilson's deployment of "spectacle characters," in order to consider some of these implications. Wilson explains that his spectacle characters, including not only Gabriel, but also Hambone in *Two Trains Running* and Hedley of *Seven Guitars*, among others, are not a spectacle for the other characters, but instead "a spectacle for the audience."⁵³ Stacie McCormick asserts that, often in Wilson's work, the spectacle character is a descriptor for characters who are in some manner disabled.⁵⁴ As McCormick argues, Gabriel uses performance in order to articulate his subjectivity, performing what she labels as *antispectacle* to demonstrate how Gabriel and Hambone "challenge constructions of blackness that don't account for disability, critique systems of normalcy and structures of power through their refusals of erasure."⁵⁵ Instead, the play calls attention to Gabriel's injury so that the reader does not simply dismiss or overlook Gabriel.

Although Gabriel is on the periphery, it is his voice we hear last. In the last scene of the play, after Troy dies, Gabriel's metal plate serves as an access point to the afterlife as he dances, blows his trumpet, and howls for the gates of heaven to open, symbolically releasing "*trauma that a sane and normal mind would be unable to withstand*."⁵⁶ In this moment of *antispectacle*, McCormick concludes, Gabriel's "cognitive disability then demands that audiences participate in making meaning rather than functioning as passive spectators. The emphasis then is not on him as a spectacle but on their need to obtain closure while relying on his voice."⁵⁷

I agree with McCormick that Gabriel's performance of *antispectacle* at the play's conclusion works to destabilize the audience's notion of a fixed ending, yet I am hesitant to share McCormick's conclusion that by performing *antispectacle*,

⁵³ Bonnie Lyons, "An Interview with August Wilson," 213.

⁵⁴ Stacie McCormick, "August Wilson and the Anti-spectacle of Blackness and Disability in *Fences* and *Two Trains Running*," 65.

⁵⁵ McCormick, 77.

⁵⁶ Wilson, 101. His emphasis.

⁵⁷ McCormick, 78-79.

Gabriel “transcend(s) spectacle.”⁵⁸ There are important moments when Gabriel *is* indeed a spectacle character. Gabriel makes random appearances throughout the play, often providing relief and humor that de-escalates tense conversations. For instance, during an intense exchange where Troy confesses to Rose that, not only has he had an affair, but he is expecting a child with Alberta, Gabriel interrupts the scene by giving Rose a rose. He then asks Troy if he is mad at him, while brandishing before Troy and Rose a “brand new quarter.”⁵⁹

Similarly, Gabriel's first appearance in the play occurs one morning at the Maxson's house after Rose accuses Troy of having a bad start to the morning. Gabriel interrupts their banter by entering abruptly, showing off his basket of fruits and vegetables that he plans to sell, while singing a tune he created that is inspired by the goods he must sell. McCormick contends that these are “relatively benign” moments that work to balance Gabriel's interactions with the criminal justice system, which seeks to erase him from view.⁶⁰ I concur that these instances do work in tandem with Gabriel's interactions with the criminal justice system, but I disagree that these moments are benign, especially considering that the audience's introduction to Gabriel is through spectacle. Rather, I contend that Gabriel's position in the play is situated somewhere between spectacle and antispectacle as he performs both, further establishing him as the character in the play who has the most lingering effect.

Furthermore, dialogue in *Fences* and narrative voice in *Sula* provide another entry point to consider the implications of Gabriel's and Shadrack's representations. For example, throughout the play, the reader is not provided insight into Gabriel's *own* thoughts. Troy is Gabriel's narrative mouthpiece, and we do not know Gabriel's feelings concerning his care, including whether or not he gifted Troy the money for the house (which Troy considers to be the best space for his care), or his response to his numerous cycles of institutionalization. When it comes to issues of care, Gabriel becomes an object, and he is not even physically present when these discussions take place. Wilson asserts that his spectacle characters are “fully integrated into the other characters' lives,” yet as I have argued, this is not the case in *Fences*.⁶¹ In *Fences*, Gabriel's thoughts are not actualized; however, in *Sula*, the reader is privy to Shadrack's line of thinking at the end of the novel after Sula dies. In this section, Shadrack recounts the day his only visitor, Sula, had come to see him, wanting “something only he could give.”⁶² As Gabriel's metal plate in the last

⁵⁸ Ibid., 81.

⁵⁹ Wilson, 66-67.

⁶⁰ McCormick, 71.

⁶¹ Lyons, 11.

⁶² Morrison, *Sula*, 156.

scene of *Fences* grants Gabriel special access to the afterlife, it is Shadrack's madness that allows Shadrack to be the only character to truly "see" Sula.⁶³

Although Shadrack also inhabits the periphery of the narrative, he is a more developed and complex character than Gabriel. Shadrack's public persona in Medallion as "crazy," a "devil," "reprobate," and "energetically mad" runs antithetical to the orderliness and tranquility in his private space.⁶⁴ Sula is the only person that visits Shadrack's home, and she trespasses on his property to see if Shadrack had seen her drown one of the neighborhood children, Chicken Little. When she opens the door, she is surprised by the orderliness of his home: "The neatness, the order startled her, but more surprising was the restfulness. Everything was so tiny, so common, so unthreatening. Perhaps this was not the house of the Shad. The terrible Shad who walked about with his penis out, who peed in front of ladies and girl-children..."⁶⁵

Cedric Bryant argues that the tension of the scene "sharply contrasts Shadrack's private and public selves."⁶⁶ Shadrack attributes his cleanliness and order from his time in the military, wherein he first learned how to live with both chaos and order. The sense of order he learned during his military training directly contrasts to the chaotic nature of war itself. Shadrack then transfers that tension between order and chaos, as he enters civilian life by instituting January 3rd as National Suicide Day, a time when he walks through the town with a cowbell and a hangman's rope telling people "this was their only chance to kill themselves or each other."⁶⁷ Although the townspeople were at first afraid, after a few years, National Suicide Day "became a part of the fabric" of the community, as the residents recalled the holiday as a way to mark time. Functioning as a symbol of death, order, and chaos, Shadrack *becomes* an institution in Medallion.

Furthermore, Shadrack also represents the communal Black psyche in its wounded form, a connection Morrison draws when she describes the writing process of creating *Sula*:

Had I begun with Shadrack, I would have ignored the smiling welcome and put the reader into immediate confrontation with his wound and his scar. The difference my preferred (original) beginning would have made would be calling greater attention to the traumatic displacement this most wasteful capitalist war had on black people in particular, and

⁶³ I am grateful to my research assistant, Ashley Clemons, for discussing this idea with me.

⁶⁴ Morrison, *Sula*, 15, 117, 173.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 61-62.

⁶⁶ Cedric Bryant, "The Orderliness of Disorder: Madness and Evil in Toni Morrison's *Sula*," 735.

⁶⁷ Morrison, *Sula*, 14.

throwing into relief the creative, if outlawed, determination to survive it whole. *Sula* as (feminine) solubility and Shadrack's (male) fixative are two extreme ways of dealing with displacement - a prevalent theme in the narrative of black people.⁶⁸

Morrison decided to begin the novel with the myth of the valley man witnessing the construction of Medallion, in order to yield a "softer embrace than Shadrack's organized, public madness."⁶⁹ Morrison understands that the effects of pain and trauma on the bodies and minds of Black people living in an anti-Black racist society are so unsettling and distressing that placing the reader first in contact with Shadrack, whose experience with war and subsequent positioning in the narrative exemplifies this trauma, would run the risk of alienating the audience before they began reading. Yet, at the same time, Morrison's choice is telling, because it also accepts, perhaps unintentionally, a false equation between disability and alienation—that encountering disability is alienating. I am not suggesting that a person's experience with disability could not lead to alienation; rather, I find it interesting in this literary representation that, Morrison, who, throughout *Sula*, creates Shadrack as a complex character, is still encumbered by cultural assumptions about disability. Nevertheless, the literary representation of Black wounded war veterans evokes the hardships that the Black community face in its resolve to balance order and chaos amid war, violence, and racial oppression.

By having Gabriel and Shadrack remain in their wounded form at the end of the texts, Wilson and Morrison reject the medical model of disability, which locates disability solely within the individual, seeking to "cure" the individual and "fix disabled people in order to relieve society of the need to be more inclusive and accommodating of difference."⁷⁰ Rather, through the character of the Black wounded veteran, the authors demonstrate the long-term effects of physical and psychological distress on the bodies and minds of Black and disabled individuals who have been affected by war, trauma, and violence in an anti-Black racist society. Finally, although their representations are not without critique, Morrison and Wilson advocate that the place of healing for individual and communal Black wounded minds and bodies is not through institutionalization, incarceration, or failed rehabilitation; it is within the Black community itself.

⁶⁸ Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American presence in American Literature," 26.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 26-27.

⁷⁰ Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell, *Cultural Locations of Disability*, 180.

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Disability, Blackness, and Indigeneity: An Invitation to a Conversation

Siobhan Senior

I have such admiration for Therí Pickens's work, and was so moved that she asked for this "thought-piece" on Indigeneity for her second special issue on Blackness and disability. Special issues and edited collections are among the precious few spaces where scholars can come together to exchange ideas about the intersections of disability and race. In her first such special issue, the summer 2017 *African American Review*, Pickens described the complexities of tracing a Black Disability Studies genealogy; in her call for the issue at hand, she noted that the scholarship has been sporadic. For her, this is both a problem and an opportunity—on the one hand, the conversation risks getting dropped or marginalized, but on the other hand, we have "a wide range of entry points" for engaging this urgent and compelling issue.

Arguably, Indigenous Disability Studies performs similar work. One landmark book does the same kind of heavy duty as Christopher Bell's *Blackness and Disability*, and it was published just shortly after his groundbreaking volume: in *Native American Communities on Health and Disability* Lavonna Lovern and Carol Locust (Eastern Band Cherokees) argue that "for centuries tribes have emphasized the normality of people with difference."¹ Scholars following their lead have sought to describe longstanding, tribally specific approaches to (dis)ability; of Cherokee descent, Sean Teuton suggests that "in many oral traditions, disability is a paradoxical source of power."² Other scholars have shown how specific kinds of bodymind impairment have been produced by settler colonialism: For example, residential schools produced post-traumatic stress and intergenerational trauma; massive out-adoption of Indigenous children has led to psychic conditions like "split feather syndrome"; the destruction of traditional food sources has created diabetes and other illnesses.

As in Black Disability Studies, however, these conversations have proceeded intermittently, especially with respect to literature. Teuton, Michelle Jarman, and Petra Koppers stand out as scholars who have explored Native American and Indigenous literary representations of disability. In her work on postcolonial literature and disability, Clare Barker, at the University of Leeds, has also been consistently attentive to Indigenous issues. But in the eleven years since its inception, the Native

¹ Lovern and Locust, 90.

² Teuton, 581.

American and Indigenous Studies Association has referred to the word “disability” in its conference program only twice: once in 2017, for a panel on “Indigenous Disability Studies” organized by Dr. Lavonna Lovern; and once in 2015, for a single paper on leprosy in Hawai‘i. It is possible that NAIS might be skeptical of a field that, historically, has seemed over-saturated with work by non-Native people in rehabilitation and occupational therapy. It is possible, too, that a consideration of disability as a separate category of analysis is not quite resonating with scholars who are more inclined toward holistic, tribal-nation-based approaches. I would argue that considerations of disability *are* surfacing in NAIS, but that they are framed differently—as intergenerational trauma, for instance, and as abrogations of tribal sovereignty. Indigenous people, NAIS keeps reminding us, are not simply ethnic minorities: They are political entities, with their own longstanding claims to particular territories, highly evolved systems of governance, and treaty-defined relationships to settler governments. Because settler colonialism has sought deliberately to eliminate Indigenous people as collective entities, a decolonial Indigenous Studies will likely insist on deliberate considerations of (dis)ability as a collective concern.

In fact, a discussion of colonialism might be our most productive starting place. Kim Nielsen has said that U.S. disability history is “a story of land and bodies stolen.” In what follows, I want to offer *CLAJ* readers and colleagues a few insights into what has been occurring in the field of Indigenous Studies and Disability, in the spirit of inviting us all to think through this “wide range of entry points.”

Institutionalization/Incarceration

Like Black and disabled bodies, Indigenous bodies pose a problem: They have to be disappeared, domesticated, assimilated, and rehabilitated. Like disabled Black people, disabled Indigenous people have been specifically targeted for institutionalization, incarceration and erasure. Black Disability Studies has fruitfully demonstrated how Black disability emerged directly from the history of slavery. For instance, Jim Downs has shown that, during emancipation, freedom depended on Black people’s employability, which in turn depended on their able-bodiedness. Thus, the Freedmen’s Bureau, which Congress established in 1865 to help people in their post-Civil-War “transitions,” created new asylums to house and allegedly care for disabled slaves. Yet, the Freedmen’s asylums ultimately *did* use the labor of many of these ostensibly disabled people to do everything “from cultivating vegetable gardens to laundering clothes to building additional facilities.”³

Whereas Black bodies are institutionalized and removed for their alleged lack of economic productivity, Indigenous bodies are removed for access to their *land*.

³ Downs, James T, " The Continuation of Slavery."

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, specific institutions also evolved to sequester Indigenous people. These included the Canton Indian Insane Asylum (also known as the Hiawatha Insane Asylum), which operated between in 1902 and 1934 in South Dakota; and sanatoria for Indians with tuberculosis, trachoma, and other illnesses. Historian Susan Burch has described how the Canton Asylum rounded up many people whose medical diagnoses were dubious; and how it functioned effectively to remove Native individuals from their land physically, while also disrupting larger kinship networks—networks that helped protect traditional lands and territories in the first place. The same result is described by Madonna Swan (Lakota) in her memoir about her time in the infamous Sioux Sanitarium in Rapid City, South Dakota, and by Clint Alberta (Dene/European ancestry), in his documentary *Lost Songs*, for which he interviewed survivors of the Charles Camsell Indian Hospital in Edmonton. It is no accident that many such institutions were established in former residential schools. Through their now-legendary histories of neglect and abuse, these schools created sickness, disability and even death; they also bequeathed devastating legacies of intergenerational trauma. And whatever forms these disabilities have taken—injured children, tubercular adults, or “dysfunctional families” requiring their children’s removal—they have been the direct products of settler colonialism. In turn, as Ellen Samuels points out in her masterful book, *Fantasies of Identification*, the “state interest in defining, measuring, and certifying [Native and disabled] identities” has served historically to reduce the number of Indians making claims to land.⁴

This understanding—that the mutual constitution of Indigeneity and disability is fundamentally about land expropriation—informs the actions of the White Earth community represented in Winona LaDuke’s (Anishinaabeg) brilliant novel *Last Standing Woman* (1999), now outrageously out of print. In her novel, George Ahnib, who huffed gas as a child to escape family trauma, is now bothered by certain sounds and the touch of certain fabrics; he sometimes forgets daily self-care; and he hallucinates, often seeing a wolf who acts as his protector. Every day “his relatives collected him from his house. . .to make sure he was fed, and his cousin dispatched her brother to ensure he was washed and had brushed his hair.”⁵ George joins his community in ceremonial dances and ultimately in a Wounded-Knee style standoff with corrupt tribal officials and outside corporations hoping to profit off reservation land; but in the novel, this full-fledged community membership goes beyond even an Indigenous understanding of disability as a valued capacity. It is a direct response to ongoing settler violence enacted by child protective services, which removes children wholesale from Native homes, and which constructs dis-

⁴ Samuels, 145.

⁵ LaDuke, 115.

ability and pathology in ways that cannot be separated from Indigeneity. George's relatives hide him from the "polyester-clad women armed with clipboards and accompanied by police officers" who "conduct monthly raids . . . [looking for] any 'misfits' who might garner more money for the impoverished county services"⁶—what Merri Lisa Johnson and Robert McRuer would call "the debility dollar." This community knows that, in the year 1970, Indigenous people are still a resource to be extracted, along with their land. Their hiding George and loving him are acts of resistance to settler colonialism, and of resurgence for an entire community holding steadfast together on their land.

Activist Arts

LaDuke's novel hints that disability activism might be a matter for the entire tribal community—including wounded veterans, traumatized boarding school survivors and their descendants, queer, and other marginalized folks. Perhaps this coalitional, tribal-sovereignty-based approach to disability justice helps to explain why the emerging field of Indigenous Disability Studies has seemed somewhat slow to produce research that focuses specifically on disability among Indigenous people's groups, or even to highlight the work of writers and artists who identify primarily or openly as disabled. Some isolated examples include Teuton's discussion of the Quad Squad, a group of disabled activists on the Pine Ridge reservation that successfully lobbied the tribal government for wheelchair ramps, sidewalks, and crossing lights. They include Erin Soros' essay on mental illness in Indigenous nonfiction. Still, most scholarship on Indigenous disability remains heavily located in the fields of policy and rehabilitation, rather than in Cultural Disability Studies.

In their introduction to *Occupying Disability*, Pamela Block and Devva Kasnitz look to international disability movements as spaces where people "claim disability as a collective identity rather than a medical category and recognize the political and economic dimensions of disability inequity as it intersects with other sources of inequality."⁷ Is the seeming paucity of visible Indigenous disability activist groups and artists—of those who purposefully "claim disability as an identity"—a question of relatively small numbers? Or is it also a question of rural isolation on reserves that have been systematically starved of resources? Everett Soop, a First Nations cartoonist from the Blood Reserve in Alberta, wrote for years about being an Indigenous person with muscular dystrophy. In a newspaper article called "Being Indian and Handicapped," he described, with wry humor, the challenges of having to travel to the city or off-reserve to get services:

⁶ Ibid., 119.

⁷ Block and Kasnitz, 3.

[T]here is something comforting in being taken care of [as a First Nations person in the city on disability benefits], when all of a sudden you are pitted against loneliness, culture shock and depression. Therefore, in the event that a group of other natives, whether they be family or friends, should descend upon this poor unfortunate, who had so luckily managed to get a half-decent flat or apartment and some food. What does he or she do? Welcomes them, of course. Anything is better than that hideous feeling of isolation. We all know the rest of the story. Our tenant is kicked out, goes back to the reserve where there are no services. I know of many Indians who have gone this way not just once—but several times, desperately trying to make it.

What about the disabled children who are forced (and I mean this literally as well as figuratively) to take up residences in strange homes leaving their parents, just so they can go to deaf or blind school? They go away, learn a sign language, only to come back to their families who cannot understand them. How many Canadian parents would protest strongly if they had to send their children hundreds of miles from home to live among strangers with a different language and different customs.

I began to wonder if maybe our disabled all became alcoholics, would something be done for them? It was becoming increasingly more evident to me that the only people who get any kind of notice are the alcoholics or those involved in sports. But alas, a handicapped alcoholic I decided, would only end up in an asylum.⁸

Soop highlights the untenability—the genocidal nature--of offering disability “services” away from Indigenous lands and Indigenous communities. Additionally, he astutely points to the colonial pathologization of certain “Indian problems” (e.g., alcoholism) at the expense of others (e.g., wheelchair access). As Ellen Samuels so deftly illustrates, Indigeneity and disability are in this instance mutually constitutive.

Futurisms

Sami Schalk offers us “(dis)ability,” which I have used a few times in this essay, finding much to appreciate in the way her articulation calls up both intersectionality and the fungibility of categories like disability, impairment, and valued capacities. In Schalk’s new study of speculative fiction by Black women, these fungible categories include even the special “powers” attributed to different bodyminds in these narratives. Schalk offers other useful frameworks as well for considering Indigenous futurist literatures, with all of their wobbly interfaces between the

⁸ Soop, 13.

able-bodied and disabled, the sick and the well, the human and the other-than-human. Such literatures, Schalk contends, work through defamiliarization, especially by situating (dis)ability as an *interspecies* phenomenon—such that they show up “the biopolitical anthromorphism. . .that prioritizes not just humans, but *particular* humans.”⁹ She proceeds:

By representing realist disabilities in nonrealist contexts, these. . . texts push the reader to understand disability from the perspective of the main character, not from our preconceived notions and stereotypes. . . . [R]epresentations of realist disabilities in nonrealist and nonhuman contexts play with reader expectations and twist them. . . .challenging readers’ assumptions about the meanings, manifestations and effects of a particular disability on physical, mental, social and environmental levels alike, forcing readers to reconsider what they know or think they know about what it means to be disabled. This challenge to reader assumptions. . .is a key part of the important political potential of these texts.¹⁰

The challenges that Schalk describes appear in a good deal of new Indigenous speculative fiction. Indeed, they arguably appear in a good deal of Indigenous literature, period, including oral traditions in which human and other-than-human bodies frequently meld, shape-shift, and exhibit frankly otherworldly powers, even in the presence of what in colonial contexts would be considered “handicaps.” Consider, for instance, stories in *Love Beyond Body, Space and Time*, a collection of Indigenous urban fantasy and sci-fi featuring Two-Spirit and LGBTQ characters. In Richard Van Camp’s (Tlicho Dene) “Aliens,” a huge spaceship hovers over each continent. At Fort Smith, the small Native community regards the spaceship as totally unthreatening, understood to be gently cleansing the oceans. Our prolix narrator recalls a story about a medicine man “curing” a little boy of his stutter:

And they say my grandfather pulled a hummingbird of fire out of a little boy’s mouth, from under his tongue. And he showed that little boy this little bird that had been living in his mouth. And he explained this was the reason that little boy couldn’t speak like other people, and this is why his voice kept locking. . . . And when that bird of fire left, it flew like a 30/30 shot, and it exploded into sound and light. And my grandfather walked all the way back to that little boy, and he said, “Now speak.” That little boy started to speak—and they said his knees were just shaking. And that little boy never stuttered again. (Van Camp, “Aliens”)

⁹ Schalk, 115.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 119

I would venture that the point of this story is not so much that the impediment is “fixed.” Rather, the close connection between this human and this avian body releases a gift; hummingbirds are often a sign of hope and resilience.¹¹ Just as importantly, the ceremony involved (i.e., a medicine man removing the bird and inviting the boy to speak) and the *story* and its retelling serve to reinforce this community’s kinship ties and relations to this land and space. People in the story understand the spaceships as “Sky People” or “Star People”—celestial beings, like those of their oral traditions. And in those oral traditions, bodily difference can be re-instated or changed just as often as it is “healed.”

Another narrator in this same anthology also embraces interspecies corporeal difference. In Darcie Little Badger’s (Lipan Apache) “Né łe!,” a Lipan Apache veterinarian has been hired to help transport “perfect” puppies—engineered never to become ill or age--to wealthy space colonists. When one of the puppies starts to have seizures and has to be returned (“For his price tag, [the buyers] expect perfection.”), she decides to return home with him and her new Navajo girlfriend (who says of the dog, “He *is* perfect.”). What is key to this embrace of bodily difference is that it *cannot* happen in the new imperium; it has to return to Indigenous territory—in this case, the Dine Orbiter, “a spool of residential and industry modules rotating around a zero-grav core. . .sovereign Navajo territory, completely inhabited by Nation citizens or their guests.” As Schalk might say, the “realist disability” (epilepsy), represented here in a nonrealist and interspecies setting, challenges ideas about what disability means. In both the Van Camp and Little Badger stories, people who have been colonized for centuries understand how to frame and accept individual instances of bodymind difference in ways that reinforce tribal sovereignty, tribal relations and tribal lands.

In these futuristic Indigenous fictions, healing and cure do not necessarily function as that tired disability trope, whereby the disabled character has to be fixed, eliminated or otherwise sacrificed. They are political necessities for entire tribal communities. They do not necessarily devalue disability or bodymind difference. They do evoke what Eli Clare calls “brilliant imperfection,” insofar as they have that capacity to “bear witness to body-mind loss while also loving ourselves just as we are right now,” as they “understand restoration—both of ecosystems and of health—as one particular relationship between the past, present, and future.”¹² Clare’s exploration is instructive, because the further scholars press into the intersections of race and disability, the more insistently we keep arriving at questions of holistic environments and ecologies, and of the colonial histories that have disrupted and damaged these lands and the bodies within them.

¹¹ Navarro et al. 295.

¹² Clare, 60.

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Harney, Stefano and Fred Moten. *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*. New York: Minor Compositions, 2013. 166 pp. ISBN: 978-1-57027-267-7. Paperback. \$27.00.

After reading Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's collaborative work for a second time, I realized how urgent their invitation to join the undercommons is—how vital it is to reach for an alternative way of being, seeing, and loving one another. Though readers might be familiar with components of their argument by way of their critical article on subversive intellectual practice and the university in *Social Text* (2004), this more expansive offering introduces new terms, clarifies previous terms, and encourages the redirection and/or dismissal of other terms still in use. Comprised of six unique but interrelated essays and an interview, *The Undercommons* is a provocative world-making project or, at the very least, a radical reorientation toward love and belonging that has deep ties to a Black radical tradition. Importantly, Harney and Moten do not necessarily initiate this world-making project; rather, they make clear that what we need to get free and to stay free—what we are waiting for—already exists and can be traced back to the “hold” of the ships that crossed the Atlantic with enslaved persons—thus making their “undercommons” inextricable from Blackness itself. In their estimation, the task in front of us is to rethink or to rediscover what we need, where we might find it, and how we might navigate an endless array of apparatuses and institutions that stand in the way.

By pulling on a rich radical black tradition—including Frantz Fanon, C.L.R. James, Malcolm X, Édouard Glissant, fugitive enslaved persons, maroons, and even James Brown and Marvin Gaye—Harney and Moten reveal and problematize an increasingly administered world, its politics, and its aesthetics. As they survey various iterations of management in the contemporary moment (from governance to policy and from credit to logistics), they smartly ask about the character of command—of regulation, of *fixing*—that requires certain modes of existing, ones that often bar us from what we love, from one another, and from other things and senses. In *The Undercommons*, readers will not find an endorsement of many of the buzzwords that regularly accompany conversations about injustice and liberation: For example, words like restoration, healing (or rehabilitation), uplift, community, self-determination, consciousness, reparations, historical correctives, or even home-building are disrupted and re-routed. For Harney and Moten, the answers cannot involve the aforementioned terms because they all remain saddled by a rehabilitative enterprise; they all signal a movement from something/someone in need of repair to something/someone that has been or should be repaired. Not only do Harney and Moten contest the very diagnostic impulse, but they also expose how the prescription for treatment is neither coincidental nor politically neu-

tral. In this way, their critique and their alternative-building (life in the undercommons, that is) are inextricably linked to Disability Studies—and Black Disability Studies, particularly—because of its persistent dismantling of knowledge-power that makes bodies mean and that attempts to delimit what bodies can/should do.

As they describe the undercommons that they so value, Harney and Moten explain that participation requires us “to look squarely into the fucked-up face of things” and to issue fervent and relentless refusal.¹ By refusing what has always already been refused to Black folk, queer folk, Indigenous folk, poor folk, and other similarly marginalized, the undercommons promotes an ethos of “getting lost and staying lost,” to borrow from Dreamworks’s *Madagascar* for a moment. (If a reference to an animated film seems like a bizarre or inappropriate reference here, recognize that the undercommons privileges the nonsensical as it seeks new ways to live, to think, and to interact, especially ones that contest perpetual mediation). To live a life of the undercommons, we must learn to live with brokenness, to neglect our debts, and to refuse to repair ourselves.

Indeed, we perhaps should go further and abandon any so-called refuge in an identity or a self at all. As those in the undercommons reach for different ways of being in thrall with others, they value ideas like contingency, homelessness, flexibility, improvisation, dispossession, play, noise, and even hearing voices or seeing things. The very idea of a settled individual—a kind of possessive ownership of self—is dangerous and is a barrier to being together lovingly. Rather than taking refuge in a supposedly stable, knowable subjectivity that can quickly morph into or be deployed in the service of empire, participants in the undercommons embrace being part of an undifferentiated many—all unsettled, unruly, and always *having*, but never concerning themselves with *possessing*.

If this seems like an impossible or unwise set of guiding principles, readers should be reminded that Harney and Moten see little value in merely altering variables in an already-existing social world. For instance, they do not want to eradicate prisons so much as they want to eradicate a society that could have prisons in them. Incorporation without disruption or allegedly restorative policy won’t cut it. Finding our way, as it were, in the current state of our social world cannot be the way forward; we must burn it down and rebuild something new. With their assessments, Harney and Moten echo George C. Wolfe’s “The Gospel According to Miss Roj” in his satire *The Colored Museum* and James Baldwin’s advice to his nephew and, by extension, to a nation that never quite united under liberty or justice in *The Fire Next Time*. In the former, Miss Roj memorably schools the audience by

¹ Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, 117-118

arguing, “If this place is the answer, we’re asking all the wrong questions.”² And, in the latter, Baldwin famously asks, “Do I really *want* to be integrated into a burning house?”³ With their probing prose, Wolfe and Baldwin join countless others in a Black radical tradition (one that we can never accurately account for entirely) to amplify a key message of the undercommons: We need something altogether different, and that something is more likely if we join the undercommons and see what else comes into view for us in and through perpetual refusal, dislocation, and dispossession.

For the undercommons, though, this perpetual refusal does not happen completely outside of institutions or apparatuses of command. Refusing the binary of *either* complicit in *or* resistant to the proliferation of management and regulation (of all sorts) in our neoliberal present, Harney and Moten issue a convincing argument for being *with and for* one another, even as we are *in but not of* “the structures we inhabit and that inhabit us.”⁴ In this way, they are most clear about how Blackness and Black radical traditions contribute to their ideas about the undercommons. As Harney and Moten discuss the importance of embracing dislocation and dispersion as a way of life, they locate a crucial instance “in the hold” of the ships that carried enslaved persons across the Atlantic—constituting what we now refer to as “modernity.”

Using this horrific experience, Harney and Moten theorize about the “experiment among the un/contained,”⁵ and as a result, they reveal what has already happened that exemplifies principles of life in the undercommons: “To have been shipped is to have been moved by others. It is to feel at home with homelessness, at ease with the fugitive...at rest with the ones who consent not to be one.”⁶ They go further to describe how “a kind of radical non-locability” in the hold offers an affective dimension to understanding what they mean by the undercommons.⁷ As they explain, “this form of feeling was not collective, not given to decision, not adhering or reattaching to settlement, nation, state, territory, or historical story; nor was it possessed by the group, which could not now feel as one, reunified in time and space.”⁸ In Harney and Moten’s understanding, “the most adventurous and experimental aesthetics...are hand-in-hand with the most fucked up, brutal, and

² George C. Wolfe, *The Colored Museum*, 16

³ James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 94 (emphasis added)

⁴ Jack Halberstam, “Introduction,” *The Undercommons*, 7

⁵ Harney and Moten, 104

⁶ *Ibid.*, 97

⁷ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 98.

horrific experience of being simultaneously held and abandoned.”⁹ To be clear, they do not glamorize the experience in the hold, but they explain how it serves as a rich foundation for learning how to find an opening—to find another way existing and relating—even when surrounded by a kaleidoscopic array of management and control.¹⁰

Through their six essays and a lengthy interview with Stephen Shukaitis, Harney and Moten establish a set of critical terms that help them to play with the ideas brought to the fore by the undercommons. These terms, far more than a clear argumentative trajectory from beginning to end, give the reader various entry points into thinking about a set of similar questions and aspirations. In fact, readers could enter *The Undercommons* as a text in any manner of ways. Since the order of the essays does not necessarily offer a clear developmental narrative in the way of a linear line of thinking, readers could begin at the end if they wish. Actually, such a practice might even behoove a reader new to Harney and Moten’s scholarship. Modeling the ethos that animates the undercommons itself—play, improvisation, dislocation, noise, flexibility, and the like—Harney and Moten offer their greatest contributions: their willingness to toy with new terms without a clear, ordered destination and their insistence on abandoning more dangerous terms.

Terms like governance, policy, study, planning, debt/credit, logicity, and general antagonism will shape the reader’s journey through the undercommons. Though some of these terms might sound familiar and might immediately signify for readers, Harney and Moten do not limit their terminology to conventional usage; rather, by their own admission, they are in the business of “hacking concepts and squatting terms as a way to help us understand how to do something” differently.¹¹ Thus, at the level of language, they are living that undercommons life of refusal and gesturing toward alternatives, even as they are battling with the structure of language and all of its violences, inadequacies, and power thrusts. But I highlight terminology as a way into the book because “the concepts are ways to develop a mode of living together, a mode of being together that cannot be shared as a model but as an instance.”¹² And for Harney and Moten, their concepts are, above all else, an invitation to play or to rehearse something other-than-this with them. And within that invitation is a promise to relinquish ownership (or their intellectual “property”) and to welcome any re-routing or detours that readers want to take in and through those terms as it relates to their own work.¹³

⁹ Ibid., 139.

¹⁰ Ibid., 141.

¹¹ Harney and Moten, 105.

¹² Ibid., 105.

¹³ Ibid., 109-110.

Whether Harney and Moten are discussing governance and its privatization of social reproductive labor or policy and how it tries to deputize nearly everyone against those who need “correction,” they are in the business of reminding readers of the dangers of mediation. As they reach for more unmediated instances of being, thinking, and loving one another, they ask us to rethink where we might find the generative and disruptive work of fucker-uppers. This undercommons activity might be occurring in a copy room at a state agency or in the cubicle in the back of a non-governmental organization or maybe even in the bowels of a library at a university. Similarly, leaving a system or structure that wields coercive power does not promise that folks will necessarily participate in undercommons work. Indeed, they might take the regulative impulses with them into new arenas. Thus, undercommons work seems to be more about *what* people do than *where* they do it. Are they embracing excess/surplus, welcoming anti-settlement or anti-home, rejecting privatization? Are they practicing anti-rehabilitative logics? As far as I can tell, if their answer is a relentless “no” to regulation, their building or finding self is not a priority, and their debts are piling up with no end in sight and no remorse, then the undercommons is doing its work. And the speculative work matters deeply—even if its participants might be “*in but not of*” an otherwise fucked up apparatus or institution hell-bent on harnessing our everything.¹⁴

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¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 26 (emphasis added)

Schalk, Sami. *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)Ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction* Durham: Duke University Press, 2018. 180pp. ISBN: 978-0822370888. \$24.95 Paperback.

The impact of Sami Schalk's first book cannot be overstated, neither can its importance to the field of Disability Studies. This is not at all to suggest its significance is limited to this yet-expanding field; certainly, scholars of Feminist studies, African American literary studies, and science fiction studies, among others, would benefit from Schalk's work. The scholar's grounding in Disability Studies is especially noteworthy, for it strengthens this taut text's clarion call for Disability Literary Studies to begin the work of understanding (dis)ability, a "reference [to] the overarching social system of bodily and mental norms that includes ability *and* disability,"¹ beyond its interpretation in white-authored texts; it is also a call to feminist scholars to engage (dis)ability as an integral, orienting lens that enriches feminist analysis and methodologies.

As a discipline, Disability Studies is dedicated to the disruption of a history of ideas about physical and mental (dis)abilities and to the critique of (dis)ability as a social construction used to control, label, and evaluate bodies. Due in great part to the range of nonrealist, new, and/or futuristic landscapes, and bodies that occupy their narratives, Disability Studies provides an effective lens to interpret speculative fiction. As such, Schalk's work quite convincingly analyzes novels by Octavia Butler, Nalo Hopkinson, and other Black women speculative fiction writers. She does this through a constellation of frames that approach (dis)ability, race, and gender as simultaneously constituting one another in the formation of academic and popular discourses and people's experiences in relation to these identities, especially Black disabled women. Informed by theories of intersectionality and crip theory, Schalk draws on Black Feminist scholars, such as Kimberlé Crenshaw and Barbara Christian, and white disability scholars, including Margaret Price, Alison Kafer, G. Thomas Couser, and Robert McRuer, for a sustained engagement with and beyond these theoretical storehouses.

Bodyminds Reimagined is written in such a way that both well-versed scholars and students uninitiated in the field of Disability Studies can interact with the complex theoretical framing. Schalk's use of first- and second-person language invites readers into a conversation, while it also serves as the author's acknowledgement that these ideas rise out of her lived experience and collective receptions and readings of Black women's speculative fiction. The book is composed of an introduction that outlines the writer's intentions for the work, four chapters that draw on genre-specific theoretical framing and literary analysis, a conclusion, a

¹ Schalk, Sami, *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)Ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction*, 6

detailed notes section, bibliography, and index. The chapters are written in such a way that they build on one another, but each can still be read and taught apart from the larger text.

Each chapter advances Schalk's argument that Black women's speculative fiction offers critical ways to rearticulate and complicate representations of bodyminds, the interrelated nature of the mental and the physical, in the context of race, gender, and (dis)ability. In Chapter One, "Metaphor and Materiality: Disability and Neo-Slave Narratives," Schalk details the literary-critical traditions of the neo-slave narrative and disability as metaphor in speculative fiction; she subsequently combines these discourses to explicate Octavia Butler's *Kindred*. This reading method is useful and exemplary of the critical intervention *Bodyminds Reimagined* performs in understanding (dis)ability and its relationship to race and gender, for this "process of conceptualizing and historicizing the metaphorical use of disability in a text is essential to the study of representation of disability and Blackness as well as disability and other systems of oppression."² Schalk implies at the end of the chapter that Butler's neo-slave narrative has the range to represent (dis)ability in ways that its generic predecessors could not, particularly in the slave narrative genre, and due especially to the damaging political discourses about disability that would have undermined the goal of their writers to narrate a conquering of slavery and discovering the wholeness of humanity, void of any impairment.

The second chapter, "Whose Reality Is It Anyway? Deconstructing Able-Mindedness," extends Chapter One's argumentation to Phyllis Alesia Perry's 1998 neo-slave narrative *Stigmata*. The author explains the importance of disability to the genre's goal of exploring the "lingering effects of slavery" as they connect to the "social construction of able-mindedness," or what Schalk characterizes as the constructed "norm of mental capacity and ability that is typically posed in binary opposition to mental disability."³ Schalk's inclusion of *Stigmata* is valuable, considering how it is understudied in comparison to other novels in the genre, including Butler's *Kindred*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, and Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada*. Perry's novel is important for illustrating how (dis)ability, race, and gender present material consequences and for engaging how able-mindedness is constituted through racialized and gendered oppressions.

The third chapter, "The Future of Bodyminds, Bodyminds of the Future," shifts from analyzing neo-slave narratives to Butler's dystopic *Parable* series. Schalk pursues this temporal shift away from novels set in the past to ones taking place in the (near) future to emphasize how future worlds in Black speculative fiction address difference. Speculative texts written by white male authors (and their critics) have

² Schalk, 42.

³ *Ibid.*, 57, 61.

denied the importance of race, gender, and (dis)ability to futurity and over-populate the genre. Here, Schalk argues that Butler's work is radical, precisely because of how it centers, not abandons, difference as a point of advancing a futuristic vision.

Chapter Four, "Defamiliarizing (Dis)ability Race, Gender, and Sexuality," introduces the term "defamiliarization" to refer to the way speculative fiction renders the "familiar social concepts of (dis)ability, race, gender, and sexuality unfamiliar, all in an effort to encourage readers to question the meanings and boundaries of these categories"⁴. In this chapter, Schalk examines how the fantasy genre opens new territory for understanding the realities of (dis)ability. *The Broken Kingdoms* by N.K. Jemisin, *Sister Mine* by Nalo Hopkinson, and Shawtelle Madison's *Coveted* series are used in this chapter because of how the novels feature mythical, nonrealist bodyminds, including ghouls, werewolves, and half-mortals, to address real disabilities, such as OCD, conjoinment, and blindness. She also examines how the defamiliarization of these disabilities affect reading practices of the novels. This is an example of Schalk's engagement throughout the text with a host of complex topics; she resists addressing disability in literature as a metaphor without material and discursive consequences.

Schalk concludes *Bodyminds Reimagined* with a reiteration of her central arguments and a projection for the future of Disability Studies and its interaction with Black Feminist studies, and vice versa. She does this by drawing on and combining the work of Audre Lorde and bell hooks, reminding us that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house," with the house represented as the imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist cisheteropatriarchy; and, notably, ableism is a crucial fixture of that house. Consequently, as Schalk argues, anti-ableist work, study, and activism must move to a place wherein anti-racist and anti-sexist work, often associated with Black Feminist study and movements, becomes essential. The speculative fiction Schalk analyzes throughout the text represents such intersectional, radical politics. As scholars pursue new ventures in these academic fields, Black women's speculative fiction cannot be dismissed as a body of knowledge that is instructive to the building and sustaining of a new politics and the potential for newer, more whole representations of (dis)ability.

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⁴ Schalk, 114.

Sharpe, Christina. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Durham: Duke University Press. 2016. 175pp. ISBN: 978-0-8223-6294-4. Paperback. \$24.95.

Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* draws on an evocative archive of Black artistic culture and scholarship that includes poetry, film, fiction, sculpture, photography, literary theory, and philosophy to describe the lived reality of Black life in "the afterlife of slavery"¹, and which perform what she calls "wake work" (13). Wake work, Sharpe argues, instantiates a "conceptual framework of and for living blackness in the diaspora in the still unfolding aftermaths of Atlantic chattel slavery."² As a critical play on the contemporary aphorism of "woke" work, Sharpe's reconceptualization of emancipatory possibility is steeped in a historicized and nuanced "mode of inhabiting *and* rupturing this episteme [of anti-blackness]"³ to (re)imagine otherwise and write against the interminable "work of melancholia and mourning."⁴

Each of the four chapters in the book are chock-full of definitions of concepts (wake, ship, hold, weather, aspiration, to name a few), which are as fluid as the imagery that Sharpe conjures to describe the unrelenting violence that has been integral to the ebbs and flows of Black life since the first forced migration of Black bodies in the ship's hold during the Middle Passage. The most significant concept, the wake, that also anchors the title of this thought-provoking book, is, itself, steeped in multiple meanings:

Wake: the track left on the water's surface by a ship; the disturbance caused by a body swimming, or moved, in water⁵....Wake; the state of wakefulness; consciousness⁶....Wake; in the line of recoil of (a gun)⁷....
Wake: a watch or vigil held beside a body who has died, sometimes accompanied by ritual observances including eating and drinking⁸

Located in the first chapter, each of these definitions seep into the other chapters, extending the investigation of the cultural archives of Black life in order to find "the agents buried beneath... the accumulated erasures, projections,

¹ Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 5.

² *Ibid.*, 2.

³ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵ Sharpe, 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

fabulations, and misnamings”⁹ of the “everyday of Black immanent and imminent death, and...[to track] the ways we resist, rupture, and disrupt that immanence and imminence aesthetically and materially”¹⁰.

My review is responsive to the context of this special issue on Blackness and Disability. Thus, my reading of Sharpe’s book is through what Theri Pickens has described as the overlapping lenses of Blackness and disability. In doing so, I recognize that Blackness and disability exist in an uneasy tension, linked together by epistemic and material violences that proliferate in the wake of the collusive damages of anti-Blackness and ableism on Black life. *In the Wake* is replete with narratives of the volatile relationship between Blackness and disability in each chapter. Although Sharpe authors these overlaps, her analysis gestures towards, but does not foreground, the historical and material relationships between disability and Black life and the erasures and possibilities such an analysis could foreground. This review, therefore, marks these moments in the text in order to realize the richer theoretical and analytical gifts this book bestows.

The first chapter begins with a literal discussion of the wake “as a problem of and for thought”¹¹ by venturing into the personal. Here, Sharpe memorializes the deaths of several members of her immediate family whose “skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment”¹² were structured at the intersections of Blackness and disability. Diagnosed with severe attachment disorder (on account of abuse suffered in his early life before adoption), her adopted nephew, Caleb, was fatally shot as he left his apartment on Pittsburgh’s north side. Her cousin Robert, whom doctors diagnosed with schizophrenia, was shot in the back multiple times by Philadelphia police, even though he was unarmed. Her older brother, Stephen, lived with sickle cell disease and subsequently was diagnosed with malignant mesothelioma (perhaps obtained through prolonged exposure to asbestos from work in a local insulation company); upon his visit to the hospital, he was retained for troubled breathing and, unfortunately, died even as his family kept vigil. Sharpe moves from these personal narratives to the historical and contemporary realities of Black life by invoking the creative and scholarly work of Dionne Brand, Saidiya Hartman, and Claudia Rankine, among others, in order to “stay in this wake time”¹³ and rupture the silences that facilitate Black social and physical death. Here, even while Sharpe

⁹ Ibid., 12.

¹⁰ Ibid., 3.

¹¹ Ibid., 5.

¹² Ibid., 5.

¹³ Ibid., 22.

attends to Black life and Black suffering through her wake work, she implicitly witnesses how disability is also “produced by the contemporary conditions of Black life as it is lived near death, as deathliness in the wake of slavery”¹⁴.

The next analytic space Sharpe inhabits is that of the slave ship narrated through M. NourbeSe Philip’s poetic rendition of *Zong!* The *Zong* was a slave ship that, while sailing en route to Jamaica, mistakenly overshot the island and, as a result, ran out of water and food. In order to save the rest of the “cargo”, the captain and his crew threw nearly 132 captured Africans aboard to jettison the load. The ship owners (Gregson) sued the underwriters (Gilbert) in a 1783 court case claiming as lost property the murdered Africans. At the deposition, the crewmen aboard the *Zong* reported that these murders of captured Africans could be claimed as “lost property” that was jettisoned for the greater good of the whole; an argument that would get a larger payout than if the enslaved Africans died of “natural causes.” Contrasting official accounts of this violence with Philip’s rewriting that “care[d] for, comfort[ed] and defend[ed] those already dead, those dying, and those living lives consigned to the possibility of always-imminent death”¹⁵, Sharpe describes these rewritings as “a wake of sorts.”¹⁶ Sharpe extends this discussion to reference poet June Jordan’s lengthy sonnet honoring Phillis Wheatley, the first published Black poet, whom her slaveowners named after the slave ship *Phillis* that brought her to America. Sharpe also ponders a contemporary photograph of a ten-year old Haitian girl lying on a stretcher in the wake of the Haitian earthquake of 2010 with the word *Ship* taped to her forehead. Sharpe reminds the reader in her deft analyses of each of these narratives that such representations are “evocative of other contemporary [narratives of Black life], as they, too, are mis/seen and all too often un/accounted for.”¹⁷

To illustrate how easily Black life can be mis/seen and un/accounted for, Sharpe offers a critique of the film, *The Forgotten Space*, which documents the contemporary violence and wreckage that were the byproducts of maritime trade operating in the service of transnational capitalism. Sharpe’s critique of the film lies in its occlusion of the violence that European slave traders directed against the people throughout the African diaspora, with the exception of the lone appearance of a Black woman, Aereile Jackson, who is assigned the dubious moniker of “a former mother”¹⁸ in the film’s credits. In the film, Jackson appears on camera clutching

¹⁴ Sharpe, 7-8.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁷ Sharpe, 51.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

an armful of baby dolls that serve as placeholders for her children who were removed from her care. Insisting that she is neither on drugs nor mentally ill, Jackson adroitly attributes her falling hair, her weighty body, and her strange appearance to the emotional stress caused by this forced family separation and her homelessness. Though Jackson refutes the ableist constructions of herself as disabled, she, nevertheless, recognizes the political economy that constitutes Black disabled subjects--an analysis that is there for the taking, if only Sharpe had foregrounded the overlapping contexts of Blackness and disability in her analysis.

In Chapter 3, Sharpe leads us into the treacherous depths of the ship's hold where human cargo was/is stowed/detained. Here, Sharpe's analysis is especially brilliant, as she describes the hold through several spatial configurations: (i) the slave/refugee ship where human cargo was/is so tightly packed wracked by heat, hunger, thirst, and sores; (ii) the birth canal that signals incarcerated women in the United States giving birth to children in shackles in the belly of the state; (iii) the hold as represented by stop and frisk policies, family detention centers, quarantine zones, holding cells; (iv) schools and other institutional settings where black children who are not seen as children become holding sites of surveillance; and (v) the prison hold that serves as nothing more than "the land-based slave ship."¹⁹

Sharpe demonstrates how each of these spatial configurations renders Black subjectivities as illegitimate, creating what she calls "anagrammatical Blackness"²⁰. An anagram is a word that acquires a different meaning when its letters are rearranged. Following this definition, according to Sharpe, anagrammatical Blackness is "blackness anew...putting pressure on meaning and that against which meaning is made."²¹ One way to enable alternate meanings of Blackness, Sharpe suggests, is by way of retinal detachment and retinal (re)attachment--a disability metaphor that appeared as an interesting deployment on Sharpe's part. Sharpe derives this metaphor from artist Kara Walker's work, where she describes the need to detach--to not see, even if it may lead to blindness, because it may enable one to behold/be beholden "in the wake...of an opportunity...in our Black bodies to try to look, try to see."²²

In the final chapter, Sharpe tackles the weather, or "the condition of the atmosphere as subject to vicissitudes."²³ For Sharpe, "the weather is the total climate;

¹⁹ Sharpe, 75.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 75.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 75.

²² *Ibid.*, 101.

²³ *Ibid.*, 102.

and that climate is antiblack.”²⁴ Sharpe builds on this metaphor of the weather to distinguish between a singular event and singularity. Thus, Sharpe argues that, rather than slavery being a singular event, it was a singularity--“a weather event or phenomenon likely to occur around a particular time or date or set of circumstances.”²⁵ In other words, though slavery may no longer be legal, the brutality that it conveyed continues to occur via the singularity of anti-Blackness, or as Sharpe describes even more clearly: “[A]ntiblackness is pervasive as climate.”²⁶

So, how does one survive this pervasive anti-Blackness and refuse the push towards Black death? Sharpe describes how, during slavery, the weather determined the local practices of working enslaved people and those very conditions exhausted the lungs and bodies of the enslaved. It is in this context again that Sharpe invokes (unwittingly) the overlapping lenses of Blackness and disability by foregrounding the embodied act of aspiration, or the act of “keeping and putting breath back in the Black body in hostile weather.”²⁷ Recognized as both violent and life-giving, the wake work of aspiration necessitates “new modes of writing, new modes of making-sensible”²⁸ Black life. One possibility, Dionne Brand suggests is the Ruttier, “a long poem containing navigational instructions which sailors learned by heart and recited from memory.”²⁹ Drawing on Brand’s elaboration, Sharpe sees its potential as “a guide to indiscipline and lawlessness; a map of disinheritance and inhabitation; a guide to how, traveling light, one might just live free of...the weight of responsibility of one’s planned demise...[working] against that dysgraphia that would insist on the smallness of Black being in the wake”³⁰

This rewriting of Blackness as Being once again foregrounds the overlapping lenses of Blackness and disability. In fact, one could argue that both Black Studies and Disability Studies can collectively challenge the normative notions of what it means to be human. Nothing exemplifies this better than the following quote, which embodies the transgressive potential of Blackness and disability in Zabou, the fantastically dressed woman in the film *Timbuktu*:

²⁴ Ibid., 104.

²⁵ Sharpe, 106.

²⁶ Ibid., 106.

²⁷ Ibid., 113.

²⁸ Ibid., 113.

²⁹ Ibid., 106.

³⁰ Ibid., 131.

Time doesn't matter, the earthquake is my body, the cracks, it's me!
 Cracked open from head to toe and vice versa, my arms, my back, and
 my face cracked. What is time? I am cracked. Sweetpea, you and I are
 alike. We're both cracked. Cracked everywhere.³¹

Christina Sharpe's thought-provoking work enables such intersectional readings of Blackness and disability that promise both theoretical and emancipatory possibility in the wake work that remains to be done.

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³¹ Sharpe, 128.

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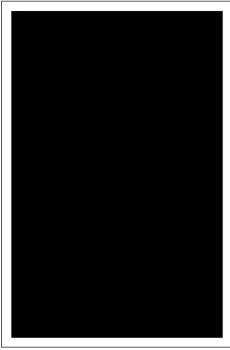
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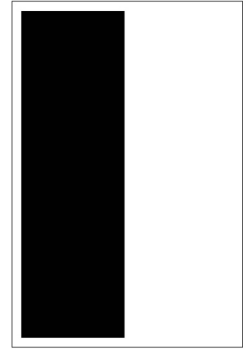
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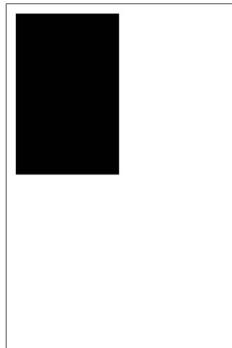
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