

THE CONSTITUTIVE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RACE AND DISABILITY  
IN AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE: A BLACK CRITICAL  
DISABILITIES STUDIES APPROACH

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A DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in the Department of English  
in the Graduate School of  
The University of Alabama

TUSCALOOSA, ALABAMA

2017

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## ABSTRACT

In this project, I examine what disability scholars such as Ellen Samuels, Nirmala Erevelles, and Cynthia Wu label as the “constitutive relationship” between race and disability, meaning that race informs disability in the same way that disability informs race. The relationship between the two categories of difference is interconnected, yet seldom does black literary studies engage a disability studies praxis and rarely does disability studies engage with African American literature. I formulate a theory of reading race and disability as it pertains to the fiction, authors, and the larger African American and disability communities and strive to reconcile the overlooked, yet imperative, relationship between the two categories of difference. By using a Black Critical Disabilities Studies Approach, as I label it, my project breaks down the ways in which African American authors and scholars use disability as a metaphor for race, usually carrying a negative connotation. Not only do I engage the rhetorical strategies of disability in African American literature and scholarship, but I also employ a historical materialist lens to explore how, through the brutal system of slavery, the black body becomes the epitome of the disabled figure. Finally, I argue that using a Black Critical Disabilities Studies Approach allows for nuanced ways of reading African American literary texts, especially in terms of African American identity.

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to all of those who came before me, allowing me the opportunities afforded to me currently, as well as all of those who will come after me—may one or two words, phrases, or pages inspire you.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is with great pleasure that I thank the many friends, colleagues, and faculty members who have helped me through this research process. First, I must thank God, as I know through Him all things are possible. I am deeply indebted to my amazingly efficient, challenging, and knowledgeable dissertation chair, Trudier Harris. You are my motivation for greatness! I also want to thank my dissertation committee, including Cassander Smith, Philip Beidler, Nirmala Erevelles, and Yolanda Manora for your time and feedback. Thank you to all of my professors who have molded me into the scholar I am today, from undergraduate at Agnes Scott College to completion of this project here at the University of Alabama. I could not have successfully completed this journey without the encouragement, love, and laughs from my friends, including Chantal Revere, Raevan Harris, Charmaine Morrow, Briana Whiteside, and Johnny Tice, amongst others. I love all of y'all! Thank you to Kemeshia Randle for all your guidance and patience. You are a goldmine of great advice and help!

Furthermore, this research project would not have been completed in such a timely manner without a fellowship from the Southern Regional Education Board during my writing year.

Finally, I want to thank my incredible family, especially my brother, DJ, and my parents, Carolyn and Dennis. Dad, thank you for allowing me to overtake your office conference room for an entire year. Mom, thanks for keeping me physically and spiritually fed with our daily lunch outings. Thanks, Face, for encouraging me not to give up.

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## INTRODUCTION

In *Incidents in the Life of A Slave Girl* (1861), Linda Brent, a pseudonym for Harriet Jacobs, recounts becoming physically impaired after spending seven years in the crawl space of her grandmother's attic to convince her cruel master, Dr. Flint, that she had run away. In *Iola Leroy, or, Shadows Uplifted* (1892), Iola Leroy's uncle, Robert, explains to Harry, Iola's brother, that disabilities surround colored people. In *Invisible Man* (1952), Brother Tarp, who works with the narrator, has a lame leg which is thought to be the result of Rheumatism. In *Appalachee Red* (1978), protagonist Little Bit Thompson goes insane after she refuses to believe her husband has been killed by the Ku Klux Klan. In *Push* (1996), the main character, Precious, is raped by her father and gives birth to a child with Down Syndrome. After years of what I thought were simply small, unrelated, instances of human difference, through taking courses, research, and teaching, I slowly began to realize that a disability presence is everywhere in African American literature. But how could I, along with other scholars of African American literature, miss something that seems so pervasive to me now? How has black literary studies, which is rather inclusive in thinking about identity politics, including issues of race, gender, nation, class, religion, and so on, been eliding disability? This project is an investigation into the undiscussed but lurking presence of disability in African American literature. By engaging both a disability studies praxis and a black literary studies analysis, I explore the ways in which race and disability inform each other in African American literature. The relationship between the two categories of difference is interconnected, yet in both black literary studies and disability studies there is a dearth of

research exploring this relationship. Seldom does black literary studies engage a disability studies praxis and somewhat less does disability studies engage with African American literature. Nonetheless, as I argue, the two disciplines have much to offer each other.

Until more recently, there has been a disconnect between issues of race and ethnicity and disability studies. In his 2006 scathing critique of disability studies, Chris Bell argues in “Introducing White Disability Studies: A Modest Proposal,” that disability studies thus far has whitewashed “disability history, ontology and phenomenology” (Bell 275). He posits that White Disability Studies (as he names it) has largely excluded people of color and instead focuses on the work of white individuals and is produced mostly by white authors, scholars, and activists (275). He ascertains how a discipline that wishes to fight ableism marginalizes the voices of people of color within the movement. By critiquing such well-known disability studies scholars such as Simi Linton and Lennard Davis, Bell insists that because of White Disability Studies’ focus on whiteness, readers of their works, and in general works of many disability scholars, receive a distorted view of disability studies.

In response to Bell’s call for inclusivity in terms of intersecting identities in disability studies, many scholars have begun to engage in a more intersectional approach to disability studies. Although I am not the first person to insist upon a merge between black literary studies and disability studies, few disability scholars and even fewer literature scholars have made explicit the relationship between race and disability in literature. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (1997) offers one of the first inclusive studies of engaging disability and fiction. She investigates how the cultural self and the cultural other operate in tandem to produce and sustain a social hierarchy

that simultaneously values certain bodies while devaluing others. She coins the term, *normate*, which

names the veiled subject position of cultural self, the figure outlined by the array of deviant others whose marked bodies shore up the normate's boundaries. The term *normate* usefully designates the social figure through which people can represent themselves as definitive human beings. Normate, then, is the constructed identity of those who, by way of the bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them. (Garland-Thomson 8)

In order to conceptualize the normate subject position, Garland-Thomson asserts that we must examine the social processes that constitute physical otherness (8). By placing the normate subject position into the forefront of her analysis, Garland-Thomson contends that not only can we see the interrelations between such dichotomies as self/other, white/black, male/female, able-bodied/disabled, straight/gay, but we can also expose the more complicated innerworkings and even triangular relationship of such dichotomies.

Garland-Thomson analyzes six texts, focusing on how people with physical disabilities have been overlooked or mistreated, demonstrating the ways in which disability is a social construct. In "Disabled Women as Powerful Women in Petry, Morrison, and Lorde," Garland-Thomson is interested in how black women authors revisit the idea of black female subjectivity. She maintains that the aim of black women writers is to create a black female subject that runs counter to negative cultural images, "produc[ing] a narrative of self that authenticates black women's oppressive history yet offers a model for transcending that history's limitations" (Garland-Thomson 103). Garland-Thomson argues that unlike traditional uses of the disabled figure in American literature, like Herman Melville's Ahab in *Moby Dick* (1851), whereby

disability signifies vulnerability, loss, or exclusionary difference, black women writers shift meanings of disability into positive identity politics (106). For example, she ascertains that through the disabled, female characters such as Eva Peace in *Sula* (1973) and Baby Suggs in *Beloved* (1987), Toni Morrison imbues upon them an almost supernatural narrative power that “far outstrips the marginal social status accorded them by the dominant order” (115). These characters revise history that seeks to marginalize them and instead claim these “extraordinary bodies” as something to be honored and claimed (18). While Garland-Thomson does an excellent job of bringing race and disability into the forefront in these black texts, because her overall project figures physical disability in American literature in general, such analysis only allows one chapter in her work in which to examine the intricacies of the two categories of difference in African American literature. There is much more work to be done when thinking about representations of disability and race in African American literature.

Perhaps one of the most well-known book length works on theorizing disability in literature is David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder’s *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (2000). They use the term “prosthesis” to include the myriad ways disability is used in literature. They situate their discussion in the literature but always relate it back to its social context. Mitchell and Snyder understand a prosthesis as something that seeks to create an illusion:

A body deemed lacking, unfunctional, or inappropriately functional needs compensation, and prosthesis helps to affect this end. Yet the prosthesizing of a body or a rhetorical figure carries with it ideological assumptions about what is aberrant...The need to restore a disabled body to some semblance of an ordinary wholeness is the key to a false recognition: that disabilities extract one from a social norm or average of bodies and their

corresponding (social) expectations. To prostheticize, in this sense, is to institute a notion of the body within a regime of tolerable deviance. If disability falls too far from an acceptable norm, a prosthetic intervention seeks to accomplish an erasure of difference all together; yet, failing that, as is always the case with prosthesis, the minimum goal is to return one to an acceptable degree of difference. (Mitchell and Snyder 6-7)

Mitchell and Snyder argue that a textual prosthesis seeks to erase disability and move the narrative forward, and in the works that they analyze, the authors fail to return the body to that acceptable (able-bodied) norm. Mitchell and Snyder discuss disability as a metaphor of personal and social ruin in *Oedipus the King*, as a performance of disability in *Richard III*, as language of prosthesis in *Moby Dick*, and as satirical sensationalism of disabled figures as deviant in Katherine Dunn's *Geek Love* (1989). While the authors make a compelling case as to the metaphorical uses of disability in literature, they do not include analysis of African American literary texts; nor do they interrogate the relationship between race and disability in any of the texts.

In response to *Narrative Prosthesis*, post-colonial theorist Ato Quayson combines both Garland-Thomson's idea of the *normate* and Mitchell and Snyder's *narrative prosthesis* in order to create a new theory whereby to read disability in literature: *aesthetic nervousness*. In *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation* (2007), Quayson focuses on the work of Samuel Beckett, Toni Morrison, Wole Soyinka, and J. M. Coetzee to articulate an interdisciplinary study of physical disability in literature. Quayson argues that "the representation of disability oscillates uneasily between the aesthetic and the ethical domains, in such a way as to force a reading of the aesthetic fields in which the disabled are represented as always having an ethical dimension that cannot be easily subsumed under the aesthetic structure" (Quayson 19).

Quayson posits that the confusion and fear that humans have of the disabled in real life is then translated into the literature. From that perspective, readers begin to see disability as deviant and therefore affirm the negative stigmas associated with the label of disability. Although Quayson's argument is compelling, and I agree that there are some representations of disability in African American literature where the author reinforces the stereotype of the disabled person as deviant, as I will show, many authors of African American literature go beyond this reading and reveal a more complex and nuanced response to and relationship with disability in the literature. This relationship is only revealed by a more pointed focus on only African American literature itself.

There are many other disability studies and literary studies scholars who explore the relationship between race and disability in particular to African American texts, but there is no complete study that dedicates a complete project to the conceptualizations of disability and race to the field. For instance, in an article about William Craft's slave narrative *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* (1860), Ellen Samuels argues convincingly that when other markers like race and gender alone were not enough for William and Ellen to escape from slavery, disability became a key component in allowing mobility for the couple. Rather, it was the "intimate and constitutive relationship of race, gender, class, and disability" that allows William and Ellen to navigate successfully to freedom (Samuels 29). Therí Pickens and Sammi Schalk both explore the constitutive relationship between race and disability, specifically in the works of Octavia E. Butler. Pickens argues that Butler represents characters with disabilities in all of her novels, yet Butler scholars have failed to realize the intricacies of race and disability. She explores Butler's *Fledgling* (2005) in order to argue how the main character, Shori, a black female vampire with amnesia, complicates notions of ableism and racism, and therefore does not fit into collapsible binaries of a super-able black woman nor an abject disabled person ("Fledgling" 33). Finally,

there is one anthology that links blackness and disability, entitled *Blackness and Disability: Critical Examinations and Cultural Interventions* (2011), edited by Christopher Bell, and in which another article by Therí Pickens appears. Out of the ten articles, two articles use African American literary authors, both discuss Audre Lorde, with one focusing on *The Cancer Journals* (1980) and the other centering on Lorde's poetry. Pickens's article investigates the discourse of pain as seen through Evelyne Accad's, a Lebanese writer and educator, and Audre Lorde's experiences with breast cancer. She investigates both women's experiences with pain as well as healing possibilities through support systems. While all of these scholars and activists provide key entryways into analyses of race and disability in African American literature, I seek to introduce a more over-arching study dedicated to only African American literature, by emphasizing a materialist reading rather than just a textual one.

Not only is disability studies lacking a comprehensive analysis of race and disability in African American literature, but there is also a disconnect between black literary studies and investigations of disability. When disability is mentioned in African American literature, it is usually analyzed in two ways. First, in the context of African American literature, much of the discourse on disability is either alluded or referred to in terms of the psyche of the black mind, mental difference, and its impact on African American identity. For instance, in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), W.E.B. Du Bois articulates the dualities and complexities in the African American perception through his concept of "double consciousness," a psychological disposition unique to the African American experience as a sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of the other: "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of...measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings..." (Du

Bois 689). Black literary scholars often use Du Bois's double consciousness as a lens by which to read characters' inner identity struggles in African American literature.<sup>1</sup>

The second way that race and disability are analyzed through African American literary scholarship or written about in African American literature is as a metaphor for something else, usually carrying a negative connotation. For example, in "Race, the Floating Signifier," Stuart Hall addresses the violence and disenfranchisement of African Americans on the basis of skin color as "disfiguring," and "crippling" (Hall). He relates violence and inequality, then, with disability, thereby invoking a *disappropriation* of disability where disability is used "to affirm (an often subordinate) voice to elucidate agency and figurative empathy for other oppressed and exploited populations" (Ewart 152). Disability becomes a metaphor for negative forces forced upon African Americans.

Similarly, renowned black literary scholar and critic Trudier Harris argues in "This Disease Called Strength: Some Observations on the Compensating Construction of Black Female Character" that black writers have the obsessive need to create a female character that runs counter to the negative portrayals of African American women as licentious, asexual, and abused. Because of the historical abuse and the degradation of slavery, she argues that "historical African American communities could be viewed as having been in various states of ill health, having numerous diseases inflicted upon them by the ugly manifestations of racism. Black women were the spiritual as well as the physical healers..." (Harris 109). Harris maintains that, because black women have been so selfless in placing bandages on the wounds of the afflicted, they have been elevated to an almost suprahuman status. She contends that this strength, which we usually applaud, "could also be a disease" and has "become its own form of ill health" (110).

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<sup>1</sup> For examples see Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) or David Krasner *Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness in African American Theatre 1895-1910* (1997).

She lists symptoms of this disease as suprahumanity, introspection, keeping one's own counsel, Christian virtue, self-denial, silence, and domination (111). According to Harris, although black writers have tried to create a female character that counters the negative portrayals of African American women, by creating the strong black woman, they have inadvertently created a new stereotype that has just as damaging consequences as others.

While Harris's interpretation is particularly compelling, the issue that arises is not her argument, but rather her *rhetoric*. Not once throughout the article does she define "disease" or "illness," and she also uses illness and disease as interchangeable. So what then, are the implications for the disability community if we, in black literary studies, are borrowing rhetoric from that tradition without engaging its praxis? But even deeper than that, how does one read "deviant" embodiment? And how does that implicate both black and disabled bodies? As Nirmala Erevelles posits, when critical race scholars "have described the life experiences of a racialized subject as 'crippling' and 'deforming'" (or as "illness" and "disease" in Harris's case), "they fail to recognize that, rather than rejecting oppressive biological criteria, they unwittingly reaffirm an imagined biological wholeness (normativity) that was instrumental in the propagation of the same oppressive ideologies they were seeking to dismantle in the first place. They "inadvertently deploy disability as a master trope of disqualification that one should escape rather than embrace" ("Race" 147). In other words, by using disability as a metaphor, thereby "othering" it, we as scholars are implicated in the perpetuation of the subordination of a historically oppressed group. Rather, as I have previously indicated, these two categories of difference both inform each other.

Equally problematic is the use of the medical model of disability in order to think about a "cure" for the disease. For example, Harris asserts that strength as disease is in need of a cure but

because strength has not been “diagnosed as such” it has not been judged as needing one (123). The burning question then becomes, “What are the implications of thinking of disease through embodied experiences of being black and/or disabled?” Jennifer James and Cindy Wu posit that the aims of thinking about the intersections among race, ethnicity, disability, and literature are to shift the perspective from the medical view of disability. Rather, disability studies calls attention to “how built and social environments disenable those with physical, sensory, or cognitive impairments and privilege those who are normatively constituted” (James and Wu 3). Additionally, disability studies seeks to shift the medical problem of disability as treating the individual to challenging the institutionalized systems that exclude certain bodies. Instead of viewing disability as merely an added marker of difference—like race, class, gender, disability—disability scholars “call for a more nuanced understanding of a multiplicity of identities—both minority and majoritarian—so that critics can examine the interplay of exclusion and privilege that situate individuals in complex and often contradictory ways” (8). Because the material conditions affect what and how African American authors write, this engagement with lived experiences validates the point that disability studies and African American literature are in fact in conversation.

This project is a long-overdue investigation into the complexities of race and disability in African American literature. Some of the overarching questions that guide this project are: What can we learn by thinking about African American literature through a critical disability studies lens? How are African American authors writing about disability—whether that be through creating characters who might be considered disabled, or subconsciously by thinking about race and identity through narratives of disability? I examine the relationship between race and disability over a range of texts, spanning from the slave narrative to the contemporary period.

My work seeks to broaden discussions of race and disability in the literature, not only to theories of mental and cognitive differences but all aspects of disability, be they physical or cognitive. In this project, I work toward formulating a theory of race and disability as it pertains to the fiction, authors, and the larger African American and disability communities. My research seeks to engage and extend ways to read African American literature, in order to reveal different conceptions of the black subject in the literature—a lens I label a Black Critical Disabilities Studies Approach. As Maryemma Graham asserts in the *Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel* (2009), it is important to “rethink African American cultural paradigms and traditions by broadening the general readership and making connections to the work in related disciplines” (Graham 6). My work seeks to do just that: expand on territory and unearth new territory with disability studies and literature.

Throughout history, disability has been largely stigmatized as an identity, and oftentimes those who consider themselves nondisabled often feel uncomfortable at the thought of disability. Yet, the black body since its inception in the western world, as I argue, has been constructed as defect. My attention is to see how race and disability collude at a given historical period through the literature. I suggest that the ways in which narratives about race and disability are constructed historically both subconsciously and consciously affect the way African American authors consider notions of black identity in their works. As my project will demonstrate, black authors both subscribe to conventional narratives about disability as lack, deviance, inferiority, as posited by Quayson; but, they also employ disability as a strategy for resistance and a way of rethinking black identity through the body.

Although this project does not propose a complete theoretical approach to the literature, it does offer a foundation upon which a Black Critical Disabilities Studies Approach can be more

fully actualized. The tenets of my working methodological approach are as follows: First, a Black Critical Disabilities Studies Approach understands that race and disability always inform each other and that *any* analysis of race in the text must *always* involve an interrogation of disability and vice versa. The structural conditions and historical contexts in which race and disability have been constructed, (re)constituted, and maintained, work in tandem to form a mutually constitutive relationship between the two categories of difference.

Second, the approach acknowledges that the literary works do not appear in a vacuum, but recognize that they are products of historical production. Thus, to engage a Black Critical Disabilities Studies Approach, we must use the theory to make connections between the literary world and the material conditions of African Americans historically. Therefore, it is imperative that with every chapter, I have included significant analysis of the historical context of all texts. This strategy is important because neither race, disability, nor gender is constructed outside of its historical context. I situate the texts historically in order to demonstrate the shifts in knowledge production about the three categories of difference. All three chapters highlight the embodiment of bodies that are both racialized and constituted via disability. In all chapters, I seek to locate what the authors identify as the black self as it is written upon simultaneously by narratives of disability, race, and gender.

I make the connections between the literary works and their historical context by engaging the writing process itself, which leads to the third tenet: A Black Critical Disabilities Studies Approach is attuned to the author's act of self-reflexivity, and purports not to divorce the author completely from the text. Instead, through investigating how black authors use the writing process itself as a form of self-reflection, it will not only further illuminate the constitutive relationship between disability and race in the text itself, but also shed light on the author's

creative process of the text, and can even inform scholarly criticism of the text. The authors of all three chapters use writing as a point of self-reflexivity where they negotiate their own identity as black subjects. The writing process then allows black authors a space in which to understand the complexities of embodying a black body.

Fourth, this approach is critically aware of the power of language and terminologies in both the text and the criticism of the text, and therefore consciously interrogates how word choices and their meanings speak at the intersection of race and disability. While *disability* is a fluid and contested term, I choose to begin with nineteenth-century African American texts because that is when scientific, legal, and medical discourses began linking disability with words such as “disorder,” “abnormal,” and “deviant” (Adams, Reiss, and Serlin 6). These terms that were linked to disability, were the same terms that worked to construct the black body as a racialized other. Investigating how African American authors envision disability and impairment in their texts can lead us to a better understanding of conceptualizations of racialized bodies.

Lastly, a Black Critical Disabilities Studies Approach is dedicated to creating a method that is fair to the lived experiences of racialized, disabled bodies with an eye towards rejecting and deconstructing often fluid and arbitrary definitions of abled/disabled, healthy/ill, cure/care and other binaries. It strives to keep racialized and disabled bodies in the forefront of any interdisciplinary analysis. As Chris Bell posits in the introduction to the volume, *Blackness and Disability*, “the work of reading black and disabled bodies is not only recovery work...but work that requires a willingness to deconstruct the systems that would keep those bodies in separate spheres” (Bell 3). Ultimately, by thinking about African American literature through a critical disability studies lens could perhaps lead us to new understandings of the ways in which African American authors conceptualize black subjectivity in their works.

I choose a broad range of texts and historical periods to demonstrate the possible breadth of a Black Critical Disabilities Studies Approach. All chapters feature multiple texts and focus on close reading. The first two chapters feature at least two different authors and the third one author. In the first chapter, I focus on autobiography, the second on the novel, and the third on drama. I have tried to choose some texts that are canonized as well as others that deserve more scholarly attention. The chapters progress chronologically, and I analyze them thematically and across genres.

In the first chapter, I examine three nineteenth-century slave narratives—by Moses Roper, Israel Campbell, and William Grimes—in order to foreground conceptions of disability and slave embodiment during slavery. I argue that narratives of disability were vital in both pro-slavery and anti-slavery arguments in regards to the definitions of enslaved people as human/nonhuman, subject/object, valued/disposable. I establish how the two mutually constitutive categories of race and disability were used throughout the nineteenth century to calibrate humanness. I offer an analysis of Roper's, Campbell's, and Grimes's narratives to underscore how black bodies were disabled by slavery while simultaneously using disability to negotiate and define black subjectivity. Finally, by engaging in discussions about the context, audience, and form of the slave narrative genre, I suggest that by using disability and invoking a disability rhetoric, the three authors form some sense of an “authentic self” in their texts.

Following the positioning of race and disability as historically interconnected in the construction of black subjectivity, the second chapter extends this relationship to demonstrating the intersections between the construction of the black body as disabled and inherently deviant. By reading Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) in conversation with Ernest J. Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying* (1993), I make assertions about two historical phenomena occurring

simultaneously—the public display of disability during the rise of the Freak Show and the blatant racial discrimination against black people during the Jim Crow Era. These two narratives intersect historically in ways that shape the discussions of race, disability, and black masculinity in the novels. By focusing on the trials of both Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* and Jefferson in *A Lesson Before Dying*, I frame my reading of black masculinity within the context of the freak show to uncover the ways in which black masculinity is put on display, (re)constructed, and ultimately punished as deviant and defective. During their trials, Bigger and Jefferson are robbed of their humanity, infantilized, and labeled *feble-minded*, indicating the freakishness of black masculinity. I contend that, in both novels, the trope of freakish black masculinity permeates the court room and also the public sphere. Ultimately, I argue that this seemingly fixed yet fluid category of black masculinity creates a crisis of self-identity for Bigger and Jefferson. This crisis produces a space where those characters exist in a state of suspension, often realizing their own subjectivity, but because the outside world fails to acknowledge it, black men sometimes internalize that oppression or are destroyed by it. I analyze the ways in which black male characters in the novels navigate this subject position and explore how Wright and Gaines offer suggestions as to how black male characters can reformulate their own masculinity by repositioning themselves.

While the first and second chapters focus on establishing the constitutive relationship between race, disability, and gender, the final chapter moves toward issues of narrative aesthetics and suggests ways that black subjectivity can be reimagined in African American literature through a disability aesthetic. In order to envision what a disability aesthetic might look like in African American literature, I turn to the repertoire of playwright Adrienne Kennedy. Although one of the most prolific playwrights of the twentieth century, Adrienne Kennedy has largely been

ignored in African American literary criticism. Because of her non-linear structure, the disjointing of time and space, her explicit use of violent imagery, and the shortness of her plays—most being one-act—her dramas have been deemed inaccessible. By engaging four of her plays, which constitute *The Alexander Plays* (1992), I argue that it is precisely because her work appears inaccessible is even more so the reason why her works warrant more attention to literary studies and to disability studies. By using four central tenets that both disability studies and black literary studies are attuned to, including issues of belonging and citizenship, rhetorics of care, negotiations of trauma and loss, and narratives of health and illness, I argue that in all four plays Kennedy evokes a disability aesthetic by which to frame black subjectivity of her protagonist, Suzanne Alexander. Situating black female subjectivity through a disability aesthetic therefore makes Kennedy's repertoire more accessible. I posit that through Suzanne's construction of black female embodiment through a disability aesthetic can ultimately lead to new ways of envisioning black female subjectivity in African American literature. Ultimately, it is my hope that this entire project not only brings issues of race and disability into the forefront of African American literature through its historical breadth and textual variety, but that it also leaves room for expanding areas of research in both black literary studies and disability studies.

“I TRIED NO MORE TO DESTROY MYSELF”: DISABILITY AND BLACK  
SUBJECTIVITY IN THREE NINETEENTH-CENTURY  
SLAVE NARRATIVES

In the nineteenth century, the debate surrounding the status of African American personhood foregrounded a point of contention amongst citizens in an America newly emancipated from the reigns of Britain. Congress abolished the African slave trade in 1807, an apparent victory for the North, “which salved guilty consciences without appreciably affecting the institution,” for many thought slavery a problem for the South to handle (Andrews, “General” 2). Yet, slavery was growing exponentially in the American South. Therefore, defining the status of the enslaved was a crucial component to maintaining the unity of the new Republic. By using both the legal system and social practices, America actively sought criteria to define those enslaved and to justify racial difference, resulting in constant contradiction. For example, with the Three-Fifths Compromise passed in 1787, Northerners fought to define the enslaved as property and therefore not eligible for representation yet taxable, while Southerners insisted that bondspeople be counted as persons insofar as it would allow them advantage in governmental representation, but rejected the idea that the enslaved should be taxed. This “selective recognition of humanity” as Saidiya Hartman labels it, reveals the bifurcated existence of the enslaved as both object of property and person (Hartman 5).

It is this dual characterization of the enslaved as both subject and object that I examine in this chapter. Although I am aware that scholars have long articulated the contradictory status of enslaved persons before the Civil War, my inference here is not merely echoing the fact that a

bondsperson's status oscillated between human and nonhuman, but I seek to explore *how* those conflicting narratives were sustained. By examining three slave narratives — William Grimes's *Life of William Grimes, The Runaway Slave* (1825), Moses Roper's *Narrative of My Escape from Slavery* (1838), and Israel Campbell's *An Autobiography. Bond and Free: or, Yearnings for Freedom, from My Green Brier House. Being the Story of My Life in Bondage, and My Life in Freedom* (1861) — I argue that using a Black Critical Disabilities Studies Approach reveals how the concept of disability, not just race, became the way that the bifurcated definition of the bondsperson could exist.<sup>2</sup> William Grimes was born in King James County, Virginia in 1784 to a white plantation owner and an enslaved woman. He works for over ten different masters as a stable boy, coachman, valet, and field worker. He is constantly abused by many of his masters and in 1814, he escapes by boarding a boat as a stowaway to New York. He becomes an entrepreneur in New England, but loses all his property when his master finds him up North and forces him to buy his freedom. In his narrative, he explains that he is writing this narrative in part so that he can procure some of his lost funds. Moses Roper was born in Caswell County, North Carolina in 1815 to a white farmer and an enslaved half-black mother. Furious about his light complexion, his father's wife attempts to have him murdered, but his grandmother helps spare his life. Most of his narrative includes the violent encounters he has as he is sold or traded to other plantation owners in the South. At the age of 18 he, like Grimes, manages to board a ship to New York. He becomes a part of the abolition movement in the North before moving to London. Israel Campbell was born in 1815 in Greenville County, Kentucky. He works on a few plantations as a child caretaker, servant, and field worker. He becomes a devout Christian and

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<sup>2</sup> Grimes first published his narrative in 1825 and republished it in 1855. The 1855 version includes the original 1825, but adds a conclusion updating the audience on his fate since the release of the first version. For my analysis, I refer to the 1855 version. Roper's narrative was originally published in London in 1837, but the first American publication was 1838.

heeds the call to become a Baptist minister. After being sold to a planter in Tennessee, Campbell relays how he escapes with a friend on foot and via boat through Kentucky, Illinois, Ohio, and finally to freedom in Canada. He sustains himself by working on a farm, preaching, and lecturing. Campbell indicates that portions of the profits of his narrative will go toward purchasing the freedom of his children.

My reading of the three narratives foregrounds conceptions of disability in order to uncover questions of enslaved embodiment during slavery. Slave narratives were considered firsthand accounts of stories from bondage to freedom, giving voice to the oppressed. At the same time, however, the narratives were not always free from the strangleholds of white sponsorship and abolitionist motive. Therefore, they provide a fascinating way to explore how bodily violence affected the bondsperson's subjectivity and how authors of slave narratives worked to locate an authentic self in these stories. These three narratives are important because they were all written between 1825 and 1861, the time period when the abolitionist movement was at an all-time high and the tension between the North and the South would lead to what would eventually become the Civil War. The narratives represent a shift from slave narratives of the eighteenth century, which were preoccupied with documenting the atrocities and violence of slavery, to the nineteenth because questions about black subjectivity were now being raised (Foster 59). In order to demonstrate how race and disability worked in ways to calibrate humanness, first I give a brief historical overview of the dual stigma of race and disability in the nineteenth century to establish the mutually constitutive relationship of the two categories of difference. Next, borrowing from Nirmala Erevelles's reading of Hortense Spillers, I offer an historical materialist reading of how the black body becomes disabled under the system of slavery and how slavery simultaneously produces the black disabled body. Then, I reveal the

ways in which disability was written on the body in these three slave narratives and how the authors navigated their existence as both subject and object. I offer an analysis on how bodily violence shapes the subjectivity of the enslaved through the authors' experiences with pain. Finally, knowing that the authors of slave narratives did not produce them in a vacuum, I pose some suggestions on the ways in which the form, context, and audience of the slave narrative genre affected the location of an "authentic self" in the literature.

With the debate between proponents and opponents of slavery becoming increasingly tense in the early to mid-nineteenth century, both defenders of slavery and abolitionists relied on narratives of race and disability to uphold their positions. Proponents of slavery used disability as a concept to justify legally established inequalities. Racist ideologies saw African Americans as an inferior species with deformed bodies and minds who were best-suited for conditions of slavery: "Slavery and racism rested on the ideology that Africans and their descendants in North America lacked intelligence, competence, and even the humanity to participate in civic and community life on an equal basis with white Americans" (Nielsen 56-57). Scientists claimed that black people were inherently better suited for labor than whites, that they required less sleep, and that African Americans thrived on the diet and exercise that bondage created (Boster 23-24). Not only were scientific claims presented to justify slavery, but they also illustrated the dangers of African American emancipation. Scientists, including Samuel Morton, Samuel Cartwright and Josiah Knott, argued that "...African Americans, because of their inherent physical and mental weaknesses, were prone to become disabled under conditions of freedom and equality" (Baynton 20). Drapetomania, a fake illness that whites used to explain what made African Americans prone to flee from captivity, and Dysaesthesia Aethiops, a similar constructed illness that claimed to explain the mental condition of the enslaved as lazy and mischievous that is

accompanied with bodily lesions, were two diseases that were attributed to a lack of firm governance over African Americans (Baynton 20). Slavery, then, became a preventative measure for disability.

Not only did slavery proponents use disability to justify racial inequality, but anti-slavery rhetoric also attributed disability to the institution by insisting that freeing African Americans would release them from the impairments of bondage. Based upon Enlightenment ideas that placed value in self-improvement, opponents of slavery argued that freeing African Americans would allow them to become “independent, hardworking (and by implication, able-bodied) citizens” (Boster 25). Abolitionists stressed the psychological and physical damages slavery inflicted on African Americans and argued that freedom would then heal their minds and bodies, which were literally and metaphorically disabled by slavery (Nielsen 58).

While the concepts of disability, which served as the ultimate marker of physical difference, and race, a biological marker used to rationalize African Americans as inferior, were becoming by the nineteenth century criteria to exclude, include, and identify certain bodies, the collapsing and conflation of race and disability can be traced further back historically.

Understanding disability scholar Nirmala Erevelles’s historical-materialist theory of disability underscores my reading of slave embodiment in the slave narratives. Her historical-materialist view serves as the impetus to my understanding of black subjectivity in the nineteenth-century slave narrative. In her work, *Disability and Difference in Global Contexts: Enabling a Transformative Body Politic* (2011), Erevelles maintains how the body is constituted “within the social relations of production and consumption of transnational capitalism” to examine what influence these relations have on making certain bodies matter more than others (Erevelles 7). Rejecting the assumption that the disabled body always occurs outside historical context by

placing the disabled body in the context of political economy, she then situates disability “not as the condition of being but of becoming, and this becoming is a historical event, and further, it is its material context that is critical in the theorizing of disabled bodies/subjectivities” (26). To demonstrate this “becoming,” Erevelles analyzes Hortense Spillers’s conceptualization of the theory of the flesh in her essay, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” to theorize how disability becomes a commodity that has value and exchange value. In her seminal work, Spillers makes the distinction between “body” and “flesh”: “...Before the ‘body’ there is the ‘flesh,’ that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography” (Spillers 67). Therefore, the “flesh” becomes the “primary narrative” of embodiment, that is without the social meanings attached to the “body.” Spillers makes this distinction in order to trace how the violent history of slavery, beginning with the Middle Passage, gave rise to the language with which to dehumanize depictions of black bodies.

Erevelles argues that even though Spillers never specifically mentions disability throughout her essay, the scenes of mutilation, dismemberment, and exile Spillers describes in her work highlight the materiality of racialized violence and simultaneously the production of black disabled bodies. Erevelles’s unprecedented reading of Spillers serves as the foundation with which to situate my analysis of enslaved embodiment in the slave narrative. Specifically, Erevelles is interested in Spillers’s example of how black bodies became commodities through the Middle Passage. In the initial encounters between European travelers and West Africans, European travelers, as writings of exploration reveal, placed black bodies into scenes of subjugation because they viewed them as no more than cargo to be transported to the New World by sea and traded on account of their “physical impairments.” Erevelles argues,

It is at this moment that the conceptualization of black subjectivity as impaired subjectivity is neither accidental nor should it be conceived of as merely metaphorical. Rather, it is precisely 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. Further, it is also important to note that blackness itself does not stand in for skin color...In other words, black and disabled are not just linguistic tropes used to delineate difference, but are, instead, materialist constructs produced for the appropriation of profit in a historical context where black disabled bodies were subjected to the most brutal violence. (40)

Therefore, the collapsing and rebuilding of blackness and disability is an historical event, which is evidenced in the genre of slave narratives. Although all of the slave narrative authors that I explore were born in the United States and therefore did not travel through the Middle Passage, the treatment their bodies received during their captivity highlights historical moments where the black body becomes disabled, indicating that this process is under constant maintenance. This process of “becoming,” serves as a crucial component to my reading of Grimes, Campbell, and Roper, as the scenes of torture they expose demonstrate the wounding of “flesh” and the “becoming” of the disabled body.

In their narratives, Grimes, Roper, and Campbell all describe ways in which disability is written on the body under the slave system. Harsh punishment severely impaired black bodies. Israel Campbell recalls his run-away attempt from Mr. John Jones’s plantation. Mr. Crookesty, Campbell’s master, hires him out to Mr. Jones for the season. Complaining that he does not receive fair treatment as other bondspeople in Mr. Jones’s care, Campbell and a fellow bondsperson, Barry, make plans to run away. The two are caught and imprisoned. Campbell is

given a light whipping, and the prison guards wrap six pounds around each prisoner's ankle "to cripple us in case we should attempt to run away again" (Campbell 50). After a week, Mr. Crookesty, hearing of Campbell's and Barry's imprisonment and "having some other motive" (which Campbell does not describe), advocates for Campbell's and Barry's release. After engaging in arbitration with Mr. Jones, Mr. Crookesty takes Barry and Campbell to the local blacksmith shop to have the iron bands cut off, but Campbell notes that the damage to his body already left him temporarily impaired: "...but this did not mend the matter much, for I had worn it so long that my muscles had become accustomed to it, and when it was taken off, my foot jumped up and down, so that I could hardly walk" (52). Campbell admits that it took days for his legs to recover. Campbell and Barry's punishment resulted in physical impairment to limit their mobility.

However, impairing the black body did not come without consequences to the production value of the plantation. In order to show the audience the unrelenting cruelty of slave owners, Campbell tells of an incident at a neighboring plantation, where Jupiter, the bondsperson of Mr. Lipscomb, receives brutal punishment for calling the mistress "a little red-headed devil" (Campbell 67). He is tied down to three stakes and given two-hundred lashes on his bare back. Jupiter runs away but is caught and receives two-hundred more lashes: "His master then put his tied hands behind his neck and passed a stick through them. He then tied another stick so that it should be above his head, and to this he fastened a bell" (67). Similar to the punishment that Campbell and Barry receive, Jupiter is physically impaired to keep him from running away. Yet, the next day, Campbell explains that because of the violence inflicted upon his body, Jupiter is unable to pick his full task of cotton. As a result, he receives two-hundred more lashes, which equaled six-hundred lashes in a week's time. The next morning Jupiter dies and Campbell writes

that that was all he ever heard of that affair. Jupiter's black body is valued for the labor it can produce, but as a disabled body it is simultaneously seen as disposable.

Perhaps one of the most visceral accounts of torture documented during slavery is Moses Roper's narrative, in which Roper provides unadorned descriptions of brutal physical abuse, which account for almost half of his entire narrative. Roper's punishments are so frequent and severe, like Jupiter, that in reading his narrative, it appears miraculous that he should survive such abuse, as opposed to Jupiter who did not. The majority of Roper's narrative follows a nearly formulaic plot: Roper is forced to work on a plantation, finds his treatment unbearable, decides to run away, gets caught, suffers severe punishment, and the cycle begins again. As a small boy, Roper is sold to Mr. Gooch, a cotton planter in South Carolina, and finding the labor on the plantation too difficult, Roper resolves to run away. In the span of two pages of his narrative, Roper runs away and is caught three times, each punishment becoming more severe. First, Mr. Gooch flogs him, chains him by the neck and forces him to work in the swamp cutting trees — the heaviest of work Roper indicates — but he is too weak from the flogging to complete the work. Like Jupiter in Campbell's narrative, Roper is flogged severely for underperforming. After he is caught the second time, Mr. Gooch flogs him, puts a log-chain around his neck weighing twenty-five pounds and sends him into the fields to work. After Roper gives Mr. Gooch "the slip" the second time and is caught, Mr. Gooch devises an even more aggressive form of punishment for Roper: "This he did by first tying my wrists together and placing them over the knees, he then put a stick through, under my knees and over my arms, and having thus secured my arms, he proceeded to flog me, and gave me 500 lashes on my bare back...He then chained me down in a log-pen with a 40 lbs. chain, and made me lie on the damp earth all night" (Roper 5-6). But the abuse did not end here. The next morning, Mr. Gooch flogs Roper again and drags

him to the field. Roper recounts that his master's cruelty went so far "as actually to make [him] the slave of his horse, and thus to degrade [him]" (6). Mr. Gooch inflicts both bodily punishment and psychological torment on Roper to break him physically, emotionally, and psychologically. By making Roper "the slave of his horse" Mr. Gooch attempts to deny Roper of his humanity, placing him as subordinate to an animal. Roper's value as a labor-producing agent changes in an instant as Mr. Gooch reminds Roper that he is worth even less than a horse.

Roper's detailed descriptions allow the reader a voyeuristic view of his punishment, which I suggest is a deliberate rhetorical move on Roper's part. Roper's narrative is unlike Grimes's or Campbell's in that he not only narrates the scenes of torture, but he includes three graphic pictures of torture devices that white plantation owners used on the enslaved. The first picture shows a woman with iron horns and bells attached to the back of her neck to keep her from running away. Roper explains that this "very ponderous machine, several feet in height, and the cross pieces being two feet four, and six feet in length," was used quite frequently by slave holders in South Carolina (Roper 8). The picture represents Roper's encounter with a young girl whom he had seen while running an errand for his master. With the machine attached, the young girl attempted to run away to a more humane master, but only managed to get four miles before, being nearly dead from exhaustion, she was caught by the overseer. The second picture depicts the scene in which Mr. Gooch strips Roper to flog him and his two sons and son-in-law, Mr. Anderson, are present (19). This flogging was the result of one of Roper's many runaway attempts, and because Mr. Gooch's sons and Mr. Anderson were active agents in pursuing Roper, they were permitted to participate in his severe punishment. The picture shows Roper dangling from the rail while Mr. Gooch strips him, and his two sons and Mr. Anderson watch and wait their turn to flog him. The third is a picture of a device Roper calls "The Cotton Screw,"

where a machine used for packing and pressing cotton is reworked to inflict punishment on the enslaved (22). After receiving the severe flogging from Mr. Gooch, his sons, and son-in-law, Roper is tied with an iron bar to a female bondsperson, but instead of enduring more floggings, the two decide to run away. The two manage to escape their irons but soon after, Roper is caught, and as punishment, hung on “The Cotton Screw,” where his body is pulled, stretched, and hung for nearly twenty minutes.

Although all of the pictures are presented to elicit feelings of disgust, shock, and sympathy from the reader, it is the second picture that clearly establishes Roper’s rhetorical purpose in presenting the images. Roper’s encounter with Mr. Gooch, his two sons, and his son-in-law, after he is caught, underscores the power dynamics often at play on the southern plantation. During this particular runaway attempt, Roper manages to escape more than two hundred miles north to Caswell Court-House, North Carolina where he is even reacquainted with his mother, from whom he had been separated for ten years. After a week of safe harbor at his mother’s house, he is awakened by twelve slave-holders who immediately take him to prison. Upon hearing of his slave’s imprisonment, Mr. Gooch sends his sons and son-in-law, Mr. Anderson, to retrieve him. When they arrive back at the plantation, Mr. Gooch, his two sons, and Mr. Anderson take Roper to the log-house, strip him naked, fasten a high rail, tie his hands and feet together and put a rail between his feet. The image represents this scene as Roper is hanging from the high rail and Mr. Gooch is stripping him. Mr. Anderson and the two sons are positioned on either side of Roper, awaiting their turn to punish Roper. This image produces a double-layered spectacle that works both inside and outside the narrative. Inside the narrative, Roper’s body is exposed to his immediate torturers. This scene of torture becomes a public exhibition space where the white masters are authorized to gaze at the helpless body of the black slave.

Outside the narrative, using authorial intent, Roper allows the audience access to this space, demonstrating that they too are complicit in Roper's punishment.

The use of images, although generally rare for nineteenth-century slave narratives, demonstrates a larger rhetorical purpose for the anti-slavery movement more broadly. As Teresa Goddu's study of anti-slavery visual culture offers, the anti-slavery movement between the 1820s and 1850s used new visual technologies in order to provide its audience access to the spectacle of slavery through a perspective of a privileged class position (Goddu 13). Anti-slavery visual culture of the time used stock images, powerful iconography, and strategic subject positioning to relay their message. Often the images, like that of "Torturing American Citizens" in George Bourne's *Picture of Slavery in the United States of America* (1834,) depict enslaved persons in positions of subordination, looking down with faces of dejection or up into the eyes of the master or overseer with faces that beg for mercy. The overseer or the plantation owner is often physically placed in an elevated position, usually carrying some type of torture device, like a whip, to indicate his absolute power. Goddu argues that "the meaning of the visual message is straightforward: slavery's cruelties are violently oppressive and the slaveholder's power, both physical and scopic, is absolute" (18). Roper's image is a reversal of the physical dimensions that Goddu observes: Roper is hanging from a high rail and is positioned physically above Mr. Gooch, Mr. Anderson, and the two sons. Yet, the power dynamic remains the same. Roper's body hangs powerless on the high rail, his face looks down and dejected as he is presented as a passive victim to Mr. Gooch, who although physically lower than Roper's body, appears to be in absolute control. Mr. Anderson is standing tall and erect with a whip cranked back in his right hand, asserting his power as an active agent while the two sons indicate coercion by looking on in approval.

While inside the narrative the image reinforces the absolute cruelty of the slave system, outside the narrative Roper uses the powerless, black body to underscore the disabling nature of the black body under slavery. In Roper's narrative, disability becomes what Lennard Davis and Cassandra Jackson describe as a specular moment, where the viewing of disability is accompanied by the narrative and as a result of the narrative, people tend to sentimentalize it (Jackson 32). As Davis describes, "The power of the gaze to control, limit, and patrol the disabled person is brought to the fore. Accompanying the gaze are a welter of powerful emotional responses. These responses can include horror, fear, pity, compassion, and avoidance" (Davis 12). In Roper's image, the audience is privy to the forthcoming disabling of the black body through Roper's torture at the hands of white dominance. By reading the narrative and gazing at the images, Roper's audience would thereby feel horror and disgust by viewing the unrelenting suffering of the black body. Roper's black wounded body is placed on display and therefore the readers can empathize with the subject. This emotional response could persuade potentially disinterested readers of slave narratives to join the abolitionist movement. The images come to signal the disabling nature of punishment the enslaved endured and therefore associates impairment with pain. The use of these images signifies a conflation of ideologies of race and disability to the audience. The audience begins to understand black wounded bodies as inherently disabled and the disabled body as infinitely pained.

Roper strategically uses visual techniques accompanied with explicit descriptions as he offers his body as witness to the atrocities and disabling nature of slavery. For instance, Roper assures his readers that, although his treatment at the hands of Mr. Gooch might seem incredible, "the marks which [the lashes] left, at present remain on [his] body, a standing testimony to the truth of this statement of his severity" (Roper 6). Roper's body is a witness to the violence of

slavery and he simultaneously allows the reader access to witness this violence. As historian Amy Louise Wood asserts in her study on the spectacle of lynching, witnessing as she explains “refers not only to public testimonials of faith or truth but also to the act of being a spectator of significant and extraordinary events...To act as a witness is thus to play a public role, one that bestows a particular kind of social authority on the individual, at the same time that it connects that individual to a larger community of fellow witnesses” (Wood 4). Likewise, Roper’s body is a testament to the extraordinary events he survives during slavery, and he offers his individual body to the readers of slave narratives as representative of the larger community of enslaved African Americans who endure a similar plight. Roper’s constant torture at the hands of cruel owners is manifested physically on his body. These wounds become identified with pain, which become identified with cruelty, and under the premise of humanitarianism which fueled the moral compass of the United States in the mid-nineteenth century, moral citizens would then be charged with alleviating human suffering, specifically those suffering under slavery. His scars become physical testimony for those who might not believe his story and connect his individual story of abuse to the larger implications of injustice in the American system of slavery.

Similarly, William Grimes emphasizes in his narrative the remnants of slavery left written on his body. He recalls the scars his master George inflicted upon him “so severely on the naked back, that [he] carr[ies] the stripes to this day...” (Grimes 44). Furthermore, both Grimes and Campbell reveal that the black wounded body is not just individual but collective. Grimes describes the wounded body of a fellow prisoner during his time in jail: “This poor man’s back was cut up with the lash, until I could not compare it to nothing but a field lately ploughed. He was whipped three times in one week, forty stripes, save one, and well put on by this athletic fellow. You may well think this poor negro’s back was not only well lacerated, but

brutally and inhumanely bruised” (65-66). Grimes’s comparison of the enslaved man’s back to a ploughed field suggests that dehumanization is inherent in the system of slavery. Campbell indicates that such punishment is not uncommon as on one plantation, “a large number of slaves who had been so cut up with the lash, that their backs were marked with scars and welts from their shoulders to their heels” and “their scarred backs gave unmistakable proof” of the plantation owner’s cruelty (Campbell 318). The contradictory status of the enslaved is apparent in these examples as plantation owners establish that they need black bodies to sustain their plantations, yet they maim and kill those same black bodies that produce labor. In all of these cases, the narrative of identification for the members of the audience is one of disability and viewing the bondsperson’s mutilated body causes them to feel their own “bodily vulnerability,” as Jackson explains: “In the antislavery context black disability was intended to spark feelings of bodily vulnerability in a white able-bodied audience, and at the same time the narrative offered that audience the opportunity to intervene in disability through activism” (Jackson 36).<sup>3</sup> Yet these images were often so graphic that they created a “pornography of pain,” as the pain of the enslaved was often sensationalized, treating pain as “alluring, exciting, and ultimately obscene” (Halttunen 318). As bondspeople were beaten, bruised, and maimed, disabled bodies became the universal sign of human suffering and a highly effective tool for anti-slavery advocates.

Under the violent institution of slavery, black bodies were whipped, crippled, tortured, and impaired, yet enslaved people used those same bodies in often subversive ways to reassign authority of control in the slave system, albeit if only temporarily. Much of the ideology behind

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<sup>3</sup> Cassandra Jackson’s article, “Visualizing Slavery: Photography and the Disabled Subject in the Art of Carrie Mae Weems,” situates disability within the lens of photography through Carrie Mae Weems’ reworking of one of the most iconic images of the legacy of slavery—“The Scourged Black.” This photo shows an up-close portrait of the bare back of an enslaved man as it is marked with scars from repeated whippings. Jackson argues that the photograph itself allows the observer the power to see and interpret the body. She asserts that the ways in which the body is displayed is meant to shock the viewers, get them to associate with the wounded body’s pain, and move them to abolitionist cause (36).

the master/slave relationship rested upon ideals of southern paternalism, which Eugene Genovese indicates “grew out of the necessity to discipline and morally justify a system of exploitation. It did encourage kindness and affection, but it simultaneously encouraged cruelty and hatred” (Genovese 4). The practice of paternalism in the South depended upon the contradiction of the enslaved as both object and subject. In order for the masters to believe that slave labor was a fair return for their protection and direction, masters had to accept some semblance of the enslaved as acquiescent human beings: “Southern paternalism necessarily recognized the slaves’ humanity—not only their free will but the very talent and ability without which their acceptance of a doctrine of reciprocal obligations would have made no sense” (6). Therefore, because the tenets of paternalism depended on acknowledging the bondsperson’s humanity, enslaved people were then able to use the doctrine as a form of resistance. An encounter between William Grimes and a black overseer illustrates this point. One season in Savannah, Georgia where Grimes works cutting oats on Dr. Collock’s plantation, he gets into a physical altercation with the black overseer. Unable to complete his work because of severe boils under his arms, Grimes resists the overseer who demands that he continue to work despite his pain. The overseer finds a stick to beat Grimes, but as he goes to hit him, Grimes head-butts him “Old Virginia style (which generally consists in gouging, biting, and butting)” (Grimes 67). Seeing that he is no match for Grimes, the overseer sends another bondsperson to tell the master of Grimes’s actions, but knowing his master’s disposition, Grimes resolves to reach the master himself. Grimes recounts to the master the entire affair:

He enquired of me very particularly concerning it. I convinced him of my innocence...During the conversation I had with my master, he asked me how I dare strike the driver. I replied, that I must defend myself. He said to me, would you dare to strike

me if I was out there? Do you not know that your arm would be cut off if you did? I answered, yes, sir, I know my arm would be cut off if I should attempt to strike you; but, sir, if *you had been there you would not have used me in the way the driver did*: he is an ignorant old African, or Guinea negro, and has not judgment sufficient to superintend any one in my present situation. I then showed him my biles. (67, emphasis mine)

By replacing himself with the driver in a hypothetical situation, Dr. Collock equates himself with the role of a person who has power to inflict violence upon Grimes's body. He then reminds Grimes that punishment for striking the master would result in impairment. The loss of the arm indicates the loss of usefulness on the plantation, thereby indicating disablement as negative punishment. Grimes, playing into the plantation scheme of labor, value, and care, insists that such violence need not be written upon his body. Grimes is able to adopt a rhetoric of care by insisting that Dr. Collock, with Grimes's best interests at heart, would not hurt Grimes because Grimes is under his protection. Yet, what Grimes is really insisting upon is that he understands the value his body produces in the system. He knows that the reason Dr. Collock would not have "used him in that way" was not necessarily due to feelings of care, but for fear of losing Grimes as a skillful worker and thereby hindering production. Grimes offers his body as physical evidence, by showing Dr. Collock his biles, to justify that he is physically unable to perform the work expected of him. Convinced of Grimes's temporary impairment, Dr. Collock reproaches the driver and "talked to him very severely, saying, you should have examined into his situation before you undertook to whip him; you would then have been satisfied he was not able to work" (68). Disability in this instance is used as a measuring tool to determine one's usefulness and the amount of care Grimes should receive from his master. Although Grimes explained to the driver why he could not work, only physical signs of impairment served as evidence to elicit such care.

Had the driver sought to examine Grimes, meaning that if he sought evidence of impairment on the body, he would have had uncontestable proof of Grimes's impairment and would have equated this impairment with loss. In this instance, the wounded and disabled black body would have been perceived as useless.

Under the system of paternalism, the laws of slavery were concerned with the state of enslaved people's bodies, like the ways in which Dr. Collock was concerned with Grimes's body. These bodies were what produced labor and therefore negotiated profit, a point that Israel Campbell observes as he describes how southern overseers were very calculated in their treatment of the enslaved in regards to their health:

Not that they are regardless of the life and health of their slaves. They are as careful to keep them in good condition as to get 'the last lick' of work out of them, for one is subservient to the other. Their ambition is to secure the greatest possible amount of gain to their employers, and thus obtain for themselves good situations and large salaries; and, like the stock-growing farmer, they think as much of improving the value of the planter's human stock as of his crops. No pains are spared to make the negroes strong and healthy... (Campbell 318)

Campbell wants to debunk any myths about the façade of a "well-managed plantation" that the South so openly perpetuates under a practice of paternalism to justify slavery. He assures his audience that the overseer, who is oftentimes the point of direct contact with the enslaved, only cares about the enslaved insofar as they are maximizing profit for their employer, thereby guaranteeing the overseer's future employment. Thus, the rhetoric that Campbell chooses in making his claim is equally important. In this instance, he deploys rhetoric that the masters and

overseers would choose to define the enslaved—human stock—juxtaposing the subject and object status of the enslaved.

Another method bondspeople used as temporary resistance to authority under slavery was to exploit the labor system itself. For instance, during one year, Mr. Crookesty hires Campbell out to Mr. Bellfor, who owns a large cotton farm. Campbell is charged with picking one hundred pounds of cotton a day. He tries but is unable to pick more than ninety pounds. Knowing that he will be whipped for failing to pick his task of cotton, Campbell devises a plan in which he goes to the watermelon patch and places a watermelon in the bottom of his basket to make up for the lost pounds. He is successful during his weigh-in and relays that he continues this method daily, using pumpkins if there are no watermelons or even dirt, and he is equally successful. Campbell remarks about his plan, “I thought myself pretty smart to play such a trick upon as sharp persons as master and the overseer” (Campbell 37-38). He is so successful in his venture that he even helps fellow bondspeople appropriate the same technique, including one boy who was whipped nearly every day. Although he knew it was risky, by the end of the season, Campbell had taught nearly all the young workers how to “save their backs, and they found it much easier to pick melons and pumpkins than to have their backs cut to pieces” (38). Campbell establishes not only his individual mode of resistance but also helps to create a collective resistance.

While there were many tactics bondspeople used to challenge the slaveholder’s authority, like work slowdowns and unlicensed travel, the concept of disability became a strong line of defense for the three narrators to navigate their own sense of control under the system of slavery. *Malingering*, a way of “feigning, exaggerating, or intentionally creating a disability in [the] body,” proved to be an effective way for the narrators to negotiate their bondage (Boster 117). Campbell not only resisted the unforgiving system of labor through manipulating the

weighing system, but he also negotiates his own “usefulness” by feigning illness. Mr. Crookesty sells Campbell to Mr. Garner, and under Mr. Garner, Campbell is able to work by blacking boots and being a horse caretaker. He relates that he amasses almost six hundred dollars and is working to buy his freedom. After a while, Mr. Garner becomes alarmed that Campbell might try to run away, although Campbell assures his reader that he had never “evinced the least disposition in that way” (Campbell 130). Mr. Garner has Campbell arrested and imprisoned for “safe keeping” (132). When he gets to the jail, Campbell encounters a prison guard who asks Campbell what he had done to be arrested. Campbell replies that he has done nothing, and the guard reveals that Mr. Garner thought Campbell would run away. Campbell implores the guard to tell Mr. Garner to come see him in person. After two days, Campbell realizes that Mr. Garner is not coming, and seeing that there is no effort exerted to see whether he is guilty or not, Campbell formulates a plan to escape:

The plan, I adopted was to pretend to have a fit, and make a great noise and get very sick. This plan I began to carry out the following night. About twelve o'clock I commenced hollowing, groaning and shaking my legs, and made a desperate noise, which so frightened the white man, that he called the other man and roused the jailer and told him to bring a light, that Israel had a fit. When the jailer came in, I was laying flat on my back. My eyes rolled up and I frothed at the mouth...I trembled and shook, and acted my part well, for I had seen persons have fits. (135)

Understanding that as an enslaved person he is not valued in the criminal justice system, which purports to protect the rights of all citizens, Campbell then realizes the value of his body in the slave system and uses it as a tool of resistance. Similar to the ways in which Grimes’s body was impaired by his boils, a physical indication of disability, Campbell feigns a similar reaction,

performing disability by trembling, shaking, and frothing at the mouth, to offer as physical “proof” of an impairment. By performing disability, Campbell hopes to be freed from prison. The jailors attend to him by rubbing camphor on his temples for nearly an hour. The next morning the jailor sees Mr. Garner and tells him that Campbell is sick because of the fit he had had last night. Mr. Garner is suspicious and comments to the jailor, “That’s a smart boy. You must watch him. He is only playing sham” (Campbell 136). The jailor responds, “I am certain he was sick, and I can easily tell a person who is sick” (136). Mr. Garner then suggests that if Mr. Williamson, the jailor, is so convinced of Campbell’s sickness that he should send for the doctor. Upon the doctor’s arrival Campbell “looked very stupid, and talked a little insane” (Campbell 136). After his examination, the doctor concludes that Campbell is sick but not dangerous (136). Campbell is given medicine and is healed. Mr. Garner’s suspicion of Campbell’s condition underscores the distrust between the enslaved and masters regarding health. Slaveholders often linked feigning illness to the character of the enslaved and making connections between blackness and disability that constructed bondspople as dishonorable (Barclay 35). Mr. Garner responds with skepticism to Campbell’s claim, since knowing Campbell to be a “smart boy,” or cunning rather, he then assumes his character to be one of deception. Moreover, the doctor also links blackness and disability when he conflates illness with danger.

While Israel Campbell sought to feign illness to circumvent the system, William Grimes not only feigns illness but attempts to self-inflict impairment on his body as a form of resistance.<sup>4</sup> One day a man comes to Dr. Thornton’s residence, under whom Grimes is bound,

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<sup>4</sup> Grimes feigns illness after he receives a severe beating for being falsely accused of stealing an umbrella. He determines to run away: “I tried to invent some project, to make him believe me unwell. The next morning I pretended to be sick” (54). He was given a pound of slats [a thin piece of wood], then sent for a doctor who put a blister plaister on his side: “All this I bore without being sick or unwell, in the least” (54). He also attempts to starve himself so that he is too weak to perform the work required of him (54-55).

and inquires to buy Grimes. Grimes does not want to leave Dr. Thornton as he finds Dr. Thornton's treatment of him generally favorable. Dr. Thornton convinces Grimes that the new master, Mr. A----, is rich and would treat him well. Reluctantly Grimes consents to go. As he is traveling with his new master to Savannah from Virginia, Grimes divulges to the reader that he, for some unknown reason, felt dissatisfied with this new master. The following quotation I offer at length:

I then started with my new master for Savannah, with a carriage and four horses; we traveled about twelve miles the first day. I was dissatisfied with him before I had got two miles. We traveled the next day twenty-five miles, as far as Petersburg. I was so much dissatisfied with him, that I offered a black man at that place, two silver dollars to take an axe and break my leg, in order that I could not go on to Savannah; but he refused, saying he could tell me a better way. I asked him how? He said run away. I told him I would not run away unless I was sure of gaining my freedom by it. We then traveled on the next day about thirty miles, and put up for the night. I then attempted to break my leg myself. Accordingly I took up an axe, and laying my leg on a log, I struck at it several times with an axe endeavoring to break it, at the same time I put up my fervent prayers to God to be my guide, saying, 'if it be thy will that I break my leg in order that I may not go on to Georgia, grant that my blows may take effect; but thy will not mine be done.' Finding I could not hit my leg after a number of fruitless attempts, I was convinced by my feelings then, that God had not left me in my sixth trouble, and would be with me in the seventh. Accordingly I tried no more to destroy myself. I then prayed to God, that if it was his will that I should go, that I might willingly. (Grimes 50)

In this scene the reader is privy not only to Grimes's act of resistance, but also to Grimes's negotiation of his own embodiment as both subject and object in the slave system. The process of breaking his leg would consequently be means of destroying his "self." Grimes understands that, under the system of slavery, it is his body that produces value, his body that is defined as the self. Grimes attempts to take control over his own body, which has been dictated when and where to go (by his master sending him to Savannah) and what to do (forced to perform physical labor at the behest of his master). In order physically to resist moving from Virginia to Savannah, Grimes attempts to impair his own mobility. Therefore, disability becomes desirable. By taking control of his body, which has been reduced to object status, Grimes essentially is asserting his humanity. He attempts to take himself out of the political economy of slavery by destroying his "usefulness," his ability to produce physical labor. In this act, Grimes debunks the assertion that the enslaved are merely objects, because as objects they would not have the agency to act in any capacity, but in strategically acting to impair his body, he solidifies his humanity since he acts as an agent in control of his own body that was only viewed as a thing to be acted upon by those in power. By choosing to inflict pain upon himself, Grimes asserts his humanity by relating to one of the basic human emotions—pain.

These instances where disability is performed, like Israel Campbell pretending to have a fit or William Grimes attempting to break his leg, become heightened ways for the authors to affirm their humanity. While it would be problematic to conclude that disability is only equated with loss and pain and that identifying pain is the only way of authenticating humanity, my argument takes a more nuanced claim in thinking about the interworkings of disability, pain, and embodiment.<sup>5</sup> Although I by no means want to imply that all three narrators thought, wrote, or

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<sup>5</sup> In fact, Israel Campbell suggests that impairment does not always equate with loss. While he is imprisoned, Campbell tells of an incident where he encourages a fellow prison mate to exploit his impairment: "Mansfield was a

experienced pain in the same manner, I do suggest that the narrators instead negotiate pain, violence, subjectivity, and ultimately humanness through their conceptions of disability. It is during these moments where slaveholders inscribe disability upon their bodies and where the authors evoke a disability consciousness themselves, that the authors establish a multilayered sense of embodiment. During these moments the authors create themselves as subjects, encouraging anti-slavery advocates who seek merely to see the enslaved as helpless to confront their own bias and slavery proponents by shattering the fiction that torture gave absolute control to slaveholders.

Moses Roper's numerous scenes of punishment offer a multifaceted reading of slave subjectivity in relation to violence and pain. Unlike Grimes who feigns a fit or Campbell who attempts self-impairment, Roper's means of resistance is endurance. As mentioned, his nearly daily encounters with extremely harsh abuse is nothing short of extraordinary. He survives an unbelievable amount of torture. After Mr. Gooch, his two sons and Mr. Anderson whip Roper, he runs away twice more and is caught. After he is caught this time, Mr. Gooch unleashes a series of barbaric punishments upon Roper: "The first thing he did was to pour some tar on my head, then rubbed it all over my face, took a torch, with pitch on, and set it on fire; he put it out before it did me very great injury, but the pain which I endured was the most excruciating, nearly all my hair having been burnt off" (Roper 22-23). Furthermore, Roper recalls that Mr. Gooch "put the fingers of my hands into a vice, and squeezed all my nails off. He then had my feet put on an anvil, and ordered a man to beat my toes, till he smashed some of my nails off. The marks of this

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fine-looking boy, but he had one reel foot, his toes turning pretty much behind, which made that leg very small, and looked as if it would injure him very much, *but really it was nearly, if not quite, as strong as his other leg.* I told him, however, to limp and complain very much of his ankle, and I knew that they could not sell him. He acted the possum so well, that it turned out just as I anticipated, and they had to bring him back again" (Campbell 158, emphasis mine).

treatment still remain upon me, some of my nails never having grown perfect since” (23). The language Roper uses to describe the bodily violence is inherently impairment rhetoric—burnt, squeezed, beat, smashed. The verbs signal the process of an impending painful impairment—the disability yet to come. All of the actions that Roper describes have both temporary and long-term consequences for Roper’s body. Temporary because after he’s tortured, he attempts to run away but is so sore and weak he is unable to make it a mile before he is caught again. Long-term because he indicates that his body has been permanently disfigured by the punishment. Although the words “disability” and “disfigurement” are not synonymous, in the context of Roper’s narrative, here he uses the physical disfigurement of his body as a disability metaphor to expose the long-term disabling nature of slavery. In this example we have how physical violence against the enslaved disables the black body.

Mr. Gooch inflicts these punishments to force Roper to tell him how he had managed to get the chains and weights off his ankles. When Roper refuses to do so, he is brutally impaired by Mr. Gooch, who uses torture to remind Roper that he is only a body—to reduce him to only the physicality of the body. He wants to demonstrate and make Roper believe that he has absolute control over Roper. But Roper understands the power struggle here. He refuses to allow Mr. Gooch to deny his subjectivity as he writes that he never gave Mr. Gooch the information he wanted. By refusing to speak, Moses Roper asserts his humanity. In fact, Roper withstands so much bodily violence that he admits, “After this, [Mr. Gooch] hardly knew what to do with me; the whole stock of his cruelties seemed to be exhausted” (23). By enduring and surviving, Roper constructs and reconstructs his “self” in relation to the body.

Lastly, an inquiry into the dual characterization of slave status in slave narratives cannot be divorced from the context and purpose in which slave narratives were written. As previously

mentioned, slave narratives of the mid-nineteenth century were constantly concerned with establishing black subjecthood. Yet, the delicate historical climate made this task difficult for authors of slave narratives. Because the majority of abolitionists wanted to eradicate slavery gradually and did not necessarily purport that blacks should have *all* the same claims to citizenships as their white counterparts, authors like Roper, Grimes, and Campbell were charged with writing in such a way that would not seem to threaten the current social hierarchy, all the while encouraging citizens to act on their behalf to abolish slavery. The genre of autobiography seemed a logical means to perform this task. Created from “a need to explain and justify the self,” autobiography, as literary scholar William Andrews asserts, “became a very public way of declaring oneself free, of redefining freedom and then assigning it to oneself in defiance of one’s bonds to the past or to the social, political, and sometimes even the moral exigencies of the present” (Andrews *xi*).

While Andrews argues that nineteenth-century white audiences read slave narratives not to know about an individual slave but rather to learn firsthand about the institution of slavery, as the narratives of Campbell, Roper, and Grimes show, it is actually through the pain of their individual bodies that white audiences began to empathize and possibly join the abolitionist cause (5). Their narratives suggest that, without the individual testimonies of the cruelties of slavery, there could be no authentic collective understanding about the institution. Narrators of slave narratives in the mid-nineteenth century stressed the punishments on the individual black body for rhetorical purposes. Frances Smith Foster maintains that slave narrators did indeed discuss the inadequacy of food, shelter, and clothing, long work days on the plantation, but “the reading public would have been aware that such conditions did not differ significantly from those of free lower-class individuals” (Foster 103). Therefore, Foster asserts,

To combat any attempts to diminish the slave's material deprivations by proving other people were similarly impoverished and to avoid the compromise efforts of moderates who would argue to continue slavery while improving the living conditions of slaves, narrators emphasized the brutal punishments and physical atrocities incurred by slaves.

They then tried to show that such brutality was inherent in the slave system. (104)

Thus, as I have argued, disability became a key rhetorical concept that Roper, Grimes, and Campbell used to persuade their audience to act. Notions of disability became a crucial component to the anti-slavery movement because, through the pain of the individual black body, white audiences became aware of their own vulnerability. Disability became a category in which *all* people could experience as it transcended racial, gender, and class boundaries. Hence white anti-slavery advocates could fight for the emancipation of bondpeople without surrendering their notions of racial superiority.

In contrast to white autobiographers such as Benjamin Franklin, whose existence was not called into question, the ex-slave had to establish not his or her reason for writing, but rather his or her existence and identity (Olney 155). Because slave subjectivity was called into question, narrators of slave narratives often began with a preface that could attest to the author's existence. Although these three narratives establish different techniques to authenticate their stories, most slave narratives of the nineteenth century featured a preface written by a white sponsor, as in Moses Roper's case. Roper's narrative is prefaced by Thomas Price, a white British reverend, who indicates that white men in many different parts of the United States can all attest and "bear unequivocal witness to [Roper's] sobriety, intelligence, and honesty" (Price v). Neither Israel Campbell nor William Grimes has a preface written by white authors but instead attempt to authenticate their own narratives in the preface. Campbell appeals to the reader's conscience,

Christian values, and logic. In his preface, he explains, “Firstly. I have written nothing but what I have witnessed or experienced, which, as my life was an uncommonly varied one, presents both the horrors and advantages of slavery, shows the bitter trials and yearnings of the slave, and the almost total neglect of their mental and moral training, leaving them without God in the world. I have not painted the scenes with fancy; for I consider the naked truth more powerful than fiction” (Campbell 5). Furthermore, Campbell’s narrative differs from Grimes and Roper in that he adds after his conclusion an appendix which includes his naturalization certificate from Canada and pastoral recommendations that can attest that he is in good standing with the Baptist church. These documents are offered as historical evidence validating his identity and his Christian character. Grimes appeals to the Christian sentimentalism of his audience as he writes, “To him who has feeling, the condition of a slave, under any possible circumstances, is painful and unfortunate, and will excite the sympathy of all who have any” (Grimes 29). Although he has no white author to validate the truthfulness of his story, Grimes includes details in his narrative that indicate his character to the audience. Within the first few pages of his narrative Grimes divulges that at age ten he gets sold to Colonel William Thornton who had heard that Grimes was very smart. He becomes so trustworthy that the mistress entrusted him with all of the keys to the house. As he became trustworthy on the plantation, Grimes reveals this information to the reader early on in his narrative to establish his integrity and moral character. Grimes attempts to authenticate himself as credible author.

In his well-known essay “Black message/White Envelope: Genre, Authenticity, and Authority in the Antebellum Slave Narrative,” John Sekora maintains that the use of white sponsorship at the beginning of the slave narrative (as in Roper’s narrative) and the ending of slave narratives with historical documents (as in Campbell’s case) affirms the abolitionist agenda

to control the narrator's story: "If the story of a former slave was thus sandwiched between white abolitionist documents, the story did carry the aegis of a movement preaching historical veracity. The verifiable truth of that story, according to white abolitionists, is that the slave has precious little control over his life" (Sekora 497). However, as I have tried to show, Grimes, Campbell, and Roper's conceptions of disability complicate Sekora's argument. While black authors such as Roper, Campbell, and Grimes were not untouched by white sponsorship, the strategic ways they tell their stories, including their discretion for knowing what information to reveal and what information to withhold, their uses of the black wounded body as witness to the dehumanization inherent in the system of slavery, and their rhetoric of pain and loss, indicate that through invoking disability, the authors assert more control over their stories than Sekora credits.

Slave narratives were generally considered authentic if they stuck to relaying the facts instead of being creative: "...white sponsors and editors felt that slave narrators could do more good for the antislavery cause by assuming the role of eyewitness rather than I-witness. Writers of the slave narrative were urged to focus on the evils of the institution of slavery rather than on their own individuality either in slavery or in freedom" (Andrews, "Introduction" 20). In order to achieve this purpose, authors of slave narratives were often encouraged to separate the individual from the facts, a tactic that Campbell introduces in his preface. By "leaving the following pages to tell their own story," Campbell humbles himself before the audience and purports to separate his "self" from the actual facts (Campbell 6). However, as I hope this chapter has shown, throughout the narrative, we learn that Campbell has not completely divorced his "self" from the facts. Therefore locating an "authentic self" in slave narratives became a difficult and often risky task for the formerly enslaved. Black authors had to learn to navigate how to speak about their individual self without alienating their audience, especially if it was not agreeable to white

notions of black experience (Andrews 6). William Grimes seems to understand this precarious situation as he writes, “I may sometimes be a little mistaken, as I have to write from memory, and there is a great deal I have omitted from want of recollection at the time of writing. I cannot speak as I feel on some subjects” (Grimes 102). Grimes chooses to tell his audience that he has censored himself, indicating his rhetorical control as author. Although it would be nearly impossible to identify an absolute authentic self in these three narratives, since experience is always mediated by language, I suggest that through their conceptions of disability and their experiences with impairment and pain, Roper, Grimes, and Campbell attempt to locate an authentic self that gains the reader’s sympathy and establishes their humanity without upsetting the social hierarchy. Through invoking narratives of impairment and disability rhetoric, Roper, Campbell, and Grimes have the ability to be both eye-witness and I-witness. Because disability is always shifting and is in need of constant maintenance, the authors adopt notions of disability within their narratives to reassign control of the slave system, albeit if only temporarily, and use it as a rhetorical strategy to incite their audience to act without completely surrendering their “selves” to white editing.

LOCATING THE *SUSPENDED MARGINAL*: FREAK SHOWS, COURT ROOMS, AND  
BLACK MASCULINITY IN RICHARD WRIGHT'S *NATIVE SON* (1940) AND  
ERNEST J. GAINES'S *A LESSON BEFORE DYING* (1993)

In Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) and Ernest J. Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying* (1993), both authors are interested in the ways in which environmental conditions affect the personalities and fortunes of African American males in a divided America. The novels center on young black males who become entangled in a web of bad decisions, stand vulnerable before the courts in the criminal justice system, and ultimately pay the price for their transgressions with their lives. *Native Son* and *A Lesson Before Dying* become clearer in their depictions of the environmental stresses on black masculinity, disability and race if we consider them in the context of historical freak shows. As part of a Black Critical Disabilities Studies Approach, framing the analysis of black masculinity in these novels within the context of the freak show will uncover a new lens through which to engage black masculinity in African American literature, whereby a unique subject position becomes constructed for African American men, which I label the *suspended marginal*.

Arguably one of the most controversial novels written by an African American, Wright's *Native Son* tells the fatal story of Bigger Thomas, a black youth in 1930s Chicago, whose life is forever changed after he receives a job as a chauffeur for a prestigious white family, the Daltons. The story unfolds in three books. Book One, "Fear," follows Bigger as he chauffeurs young Mary Dalton and her male companion, Jan, around the town, a night that ends in Mary's death at Bigger's hands. Book Two, "Flight," shadows Bigger as he flees from police and confides his

murder to Bessie, his black girlfriend, who momentarily agrees to help Bigger cover up the murder but ends up murdered at Bigger's hands. Book Three, "Fate," highlights Bigger's arrest, trial, conviction, and sentencing, as he awaits execution for the murder of Mary Dalton. Wright explores the often fatalistic outcomes of black males living in Jim Crow America, whose environmental conditions lead to disastrous results. Set in 1940s sharecropping Louisiana, Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying* follows the time between the conviction, sentencing, and execution of Jefferson, a black man without "a modicum of intelligence" who is convicted of murder during a liquor store robbery and shoot-out where two black men and one white man are killed (Gaines 7). Jefferson's godmother enlists the support of a friend's nephew, Grant Wiggins, to help her godson learn how to die like a man—to prove to the white man that he is not a hog but a man (31). Wiggins narrates the story and vents his frustrations with the racial hierarchy, the ironically unjust justice system, and the complexities of being a black man in the South.

*Native Son* and *A Lesson* offer an excellent opportunity in which to explore notions of race, disability, and black masculinity. Both novels are set during the pinnacle of Jim Crow. Gaines locates his protagonists in the Jim Crow South, a place wrought with political, social, and economic inequalities for African Americans. Gaines uses this backdrop to propel a major conflict in *A Lesson*, which he describes "is when the black male attempts to go beyond the line that is drawn for him" (Magnier n.p). Likewise, all too familiar with the injustice of the Jim Crow South, as he experienced firsthand growing up in Mississippi, Wright sought other geographical locations with which to explore the social position of African Americans in the United States. According to Wright,

The urban environment of Chicago, affording a more stimulating life, made the Negro Bigger Thomases react more violently than even in the South...It was not that Chicago

segregated Negroes more than the South, but that Chicago had more to offer, that Chicago's physical aspect—noisy, crowded, filled with the sense of power and fulfillment—did so much more to dazzle the mind with a taunting sense of possible achievement that the segregation it did impose brought forth from Bigger a reaction more obstreperous than in the South. (“How Bigger was Born” 442)

Whether it be in rural Louisiana or urban Chicago, African Americans during the turbulent decades from the 1890s to the 1950s witnessed some increased economic gain, yet simultaneously were disenfranchised under the system of Jim Crow. Jim Crow America provided the backdrop with which black masculinity was defined until the Civil Rights Movement, and disability rhetoric became a tool with which to sustain Jim Crow. Because of rapid industrialization, urbanization, and immigration, among other factors, non-whites began to acquire more social and economic gain, threatening the prevailing social system. Struggling to maintain the current social hierarchy, white America desperately sought ways to justify their superiority and to quell their racial angst. The narratives formed surrounding both Bigger and Jefferson during their trials and their subsequent aftermaths reveal the rhetoric used historically to affirm African American inferiority.

It is no coincidence that this turbulent period also witnessed the peak and the decline of the amusement world, including freak shows, carnivals, World Fairs, dime museums, and circuses. Freak shows allowed the American public a space in which to cast their racial anxieties: “By constituting the freak as an icon of generalized embodied deviance, the exhibitions also simultaneously reinscribed gender, race, sexual aberrance, ethnicity, and disability as inextricable yet particular exclusionary systems legitimated by bodily variation—all represented by the single multivalent figure of the freak” (Garland-Thomson, “Introduction” 10). The black

body was often exhibited as the “exotic other,” racialized bodies that were constructed by showmen in order to exploit “the public’s stereotypes, prejudices, and hatred toward people of color” (Bogdan 135). While the heyday of American freak shows featuring circus acts and sideshows waned after the 1930s, the exploitation of African American bodies did not end here. Although there is no big white tent, no armless wonders, no bearded ladies, no Siamese twins, nor an entrance fee in neither Wright’s nor Gaines’s texts, there still looms within the pages an equally “freakish” main attraction. Rather than completely disappearing, the freak show merely shifted forms from the carnival stage to the criminal justice system’s court room. Just like the freak show, the court room in Jim Crow America consisted of freaks, showmen, and the public. Bigger Thomas, Wright’s archetypical black male, and Jefferson, a variation of the Bigger Thomas pattern, are indeed the main attractions in a freak show. The showmen are the defense, prosecution, judge, and the all-white jury, and the public includes all other spectators, either the family of the defendants, in Jefferson’s case, or the presence of the mass media, in Bigger’s case. Narratives about Jefferson and Bigger are created that parallel racial attitudes toward African American men during Jim Crow, whether that be the construction of a “poor boy” or a “fool” in Jefferson’s circumstance, or a “violent, dangerous, rapist” in Bigger’s situation. During their trials, both Jefferson and Bigger are dehumanized, being labeled a “hog” and a “black ape” respectively. Their sanity is called into question, and their bodies become spectacles to onlookers. The court room becomes the space where black male bodies are displayed, constituted, reconstituted, and disposed. Situating both Jefferson’s and Bigger’s trials in the context of the freak show offers a nuanced way of extending the constitutive relationship between race and disability in African American literature as well as providing a rich representation of the construction of black masculinity post-reconstruction.

The defense and the prosecution create narratives in Bigger's and Jefferson's trials that conflate meanings of blackness, masculinity, and disability, akin to the ways in which famous showmen like P.T. Barnum and Tom Norman constructed their freaks in order to appeal to the American cultural imagination of the black racial other. Through the mode of the exotic, showmen presented an exhibit "so as to appeal to people's interest in the culturally strange, the primitive, the bestial, the exotic" (Bogdan 105). Africans were constituted as the "missing link" in the evolutionary chain between men and apes. Scientists such as zoologist Georges Cuvier described the inhabitants of the "dark continent" as barbarous animals with wooly hair and thick lips: "This 'animality' of Africans was what was thought to set them apart from the more rational varieties of the human species" (Lindfors 9). The cultural exhibition of Ota Benga, a captured central African Batwa who was exhibited as a cannibal at the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904, serves as a prime example of the enfreakment of the black male body, as his humanity is called into question. Two years after his exhibition at the World's Fair, Ota Benga's impoverished manager decided to return Ota Benga to Africa. Not wanting to return home, since his entire family had been slaughtered as the result of Belgian imperialism, Ota Benga was dropped off at the Bronx Zoo. For a few weeks, Ota Benga walked around the zoo relatively unnoticed until one day, when the zookeepers observed he had been sleeping in the Monkey House, they locked him inside. He was placed in the same cage as Dohong, an orangutan who could eat at a table, ride a bike, and wear clothes, and was then put on display, turning the zoo into a freak show (Adams 32). Ota Benga's imprisonment in the same space as Dohong worked symbolically both to dehumanize people of color as well as amplify the public's stereotypes of Africans as savage wild men—that black people were indeed Darwin's "missing link."

Similarly, Bigger and Jefferson are presented as “missing links” as they are dehumanized during their trials. In *A Lesson*, Jefferson stands trial after he is offered a ride by two friends, who, upon deciding that neither of the three had any money, suggest they try to buy some alcohol on credit from Old Gropé’s neighborhood store. After Gropé denies their request, a shootout ensues that ends in the death of Brother, Bear and Old Gropé. Panicked, Jefferson is found on the scene by two white men, with a half bottle of whiskey and a handful of money he had taken from the cash register. During Jefferson’s trial, his defense attorney states that justice will not be served by executing Jefferson as he “would just as soon put a hog in the electric chair as this” (Gaines 8). This statement serves as the impetus for plot progression, as the entire novel centers around Grant’s reluctant acceptance to help Jefferson’s godmother, Miss Emma, teach Jefferson that he is indeed a man. The defense seeks to represent Jefferson as an innocent bystander, one who was “innocent of all charges except being at the wrong place at the wrong time” (7). Like farm animals who lack rationality and morality, the defense compares Jefferson to a hog in order to absolve Jefferson of responsibility. He invokes a narrative that would be all-too familiar to the jury of all-white faces with the hope of gaining their pity and mercy. He argues that no rational person, no man in his right mind could have committed the act Jefferson did, and he seeks to rationalize Jefferson’s actions by stressing Jefferson’s inherent irrationality, incapability, and lack of intelligence: “Do you see anyone here who could plan a murder, a robbery, can plan—can plan—can plan anything? A cornered animal to strike quickly out of fear, a trait inherited from his ancestors in the deepest jungle of blackest Africa—yes, yes, that he can do—but to plan?...No gentlemen, this skull here holds no plans. What you see here is a *thing* that acts on command” (7, emphasis mine). The humanity of the jurors and the subhumanity of Jefferson and African Americans is reified by the juxtaposition of the words “gentlemen” to

denote the white jurors and “animal” and “thing” to denote black men. This binary opposition works to uphold the current social hierarchy, with white men at the top and black men at the bottom, while also providing white men with the unrestricted ability to formulate decisions for those beings deemed less than rational, a key component in paternalist ideology.

While the defense’s argument consists of robbing Jefferson of his humanity ostensibly to save his life, Miss Emma understands a different context to the labels of “hog” and “thing.” She considers all the negative imagery this comparison suggests. She knows that when the defense dehumanizes her godson, there lingers a narrative that is less forgiving for black males, one the prosecution raises. Her bewilderment at the defense’s argument echoes popular sentiments of African Americans who saw Ota Benga’s exhibition as “the monstrosity of U.S. racism embodied in the spectacle of a black man in a cage” (Adams 31). Instead of presenting Jefferson as an innocent bystander, the prosecution portrays him as a calculating and violent animal: “The prosecutor argued that Jefferson and the other two had gone there with the full intention of robbing the old man and then killing him so that he could not identify them. When the old man and the other two robbers were all dead, this one—it proved the kind of animal he really was—stuffed the money into his pockets and celebrated by drinking over their still-bleeding bodies” (Gaines 6-7). According to the prosecution, Jefferson’s animalistic behavior warrants punishment equally violent. He acts violently because he is not human but an animal, a point Miss Emma does not accept. This violence is inevitably the result of what happens when black men are given too much freedom.

Likewise, *Native Son* interrogates the inherent racism in the presentation of the black body as exotic other through historical material that served as inspiration for Wright’s novel. The Nixon case (1938) had a profound effect on Wright, where a black man, Robert Nixon, was

executed for murdering several white women. Nixon used a brick as his weapon of choice, earning him the nickname the “Brick Slayer.” Wright used newspaper clippings to add some details to his novel, including “copious examples of raw white racism, especially in depicting the black defendant as hardly more than an animal” (Rampersad *xviii*). Writing for the *Chicago Tribune* in 1938, Charles Leavelle titled his article about the killings “Brick Slayer is Likened to Jungle Beast” and details Nixon to his readers as a “ferocious type”:

He has none of the charm of speech or manner that is characteristic of so many southern darkies. That charm is a mark of civilization, and so far as manner and appearance go, civilization has left Nixon practically untouched. His hunched shoulders and long, sinewy arms that dangle almost to his knees; his outthrust head and catlike tread all suggest the animal...physical characteristics suggest an earlier link in species. (Leavelle 6)

Like Ota Benga, whose existence “proved” a missing link in the evolutionary chain, Robert Nixon was portrayed in the media as dangerous and savage. Nixon was dehumanized in the media not only to try to rationalize his motives for murder, but also to justify Nixon’s execution.

Similarly, there are numerous instances of Bigger’s dehumanization throughout *Native Son*. For instance, after the police capture Bigger, the mob yells, “Kill that black ape!” (Wright 270). When the police drag Bigger into the courtroom, the mob shouts “You black ape!” (337). The prosecution calls him a “half-human black ape,” a “bestial monstrosity,” “a black mad dog,” “a cunning beast,” and a “demented savage” (408, 409, 413, 414). In terms of Bessie’s murder, the prosecution comments that Bigger killed her and “yet it staggers [his] mind to think that such a plan for murder could have been hatched in a human brain,” further earning him his nickname as “Brick Slayer” (414). The prosecution asserts that Bigger’s atrocious actions affirm his inhumanity. Moreover, during his imprisonment, Bigger is given a newspaper from one of the

policemen and the article reads similar to that of Leavelle's depiction of Nixon. In the *Tribune* article, "Negro Rapist Faints at Inquest," Bigger is described as "possessing abnormal human strength," with a protruding lower jaw, huge muscular, hunched shoulders, and long dangling arms that remind "one of a jungle beast": "The brutish Negro...acted like an earlier missing link in the human species. He seemed out of place in a white man's civilization" (Wright 279-280). This Jim Crow ideology of racial superiority worked to justify any violence against Bigger's raced and gendered body in order to protect white dominance.

Not only in *A Lesson* and *Native Son* are black bodies presented as the exotic, but the racist ideology of Jim Crow also works in ways to converge a paternalist discourse with questions of citizenship. Disability and race become linked in narratives of paternalism, infantilism, and competency in manners that construct Bigger and Jefferson as second-class citizens. Infantilism was used as a tool in Jim Crow ideology to deny citizenship to African Americans in a similar manner in which people with mental difference were often viewed in the freak show as incompetent children. Tod Browning's cult classic film *Freaks* (1932) is set against the background of the freak show, featuring real life freak show artists as actors, and it tells a story of love, friendship, treachery and revenge. In one scene, Madame Tetralini, the owner of the circus and a "normal person," takes the pinheads, midgets, and human skeleton out to play in what appears to be a pastoral scene.<sup>6</sup> When two strange men who are walking through the woods see this strange site, they question what Madame Tetralini and the freaks are doing out in the woods. Madame Tetralini responds as the performers hide behind her: "These are children from my circus. When I get a chance, I like to take them into the sunshine, and let them play, like children. And that is what most of them are—children" (*Freaks*). Madame Tetralini describes the

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<sup>6</sup> For purposes of this chapter, I invoke the terms that were used during the freak show time period to denote the spectacles of the freak show; that is, *pinheads*, *midgets*, and *dwarves*, amongst others.

freaks as children, innocent beings in need of constant care and supervision. Madame Tetralini's description of the performers as children is indicative of the ways in which people with intellectual disabilities are often perceived of as disability scholar Alison Kafer labels, "unfinished adults" or "people who have yet to move through the necessary stages of growth and development" (Kafer 54).

A paternalist narrative was not only presented in the freak show to evoke compassion from onlookers or to infantilize people with mental disabilities, but as Gaines demonstrates in *A Lesson*, this narrative is also used to reinforce black male's second-class citizenship. As part of his argument to gain the jury's pity, the defense paints Jefferson as an unfinished adult: "Gentlemen of the jury, look at this—this—this boy. I almost said man, but I can't say man. Oh, sure, he has reached the age of twenty-one, when we, civilized men, consider the male species has reached manhood, but would you call this—this—this a man? No, not I. I would call it a boy and a fool" (Gaines 7). Heavily echoing his argument of Jefferson as an animal, in this instance the defense links both narratives of savagery and paternalism to extend his claim for Jefferson's innocence. His rhetoric further perpetuates the need for white males to distance themselves socially, politically, and economically from black males by reinforcing the "us/them" binary, indicating that "us" equals the "civilized man," which equals the "white man," versus "them" that equates with "uncivilized man," which equals the "black boy." This paternalistic language provides the impetus for the ways in which citizenship has long been defined in America: "The United States has a dual track legal system in which individuals deemed competent and rational enjoy the rights of modern citizenship, whereas those deemed incompetent and irrational are placed in positions of subordination where they are 'cared' for and 'protected' rather than given equal civil rights" (Carey, "Citizenship" 38). Jefferson is cast as a "thing," "boy," and "fool,"

indicating his incompetence, thereby placing him in a position of subordination and rendering him to the “care” of the courts.

The paternalist discourse used to justify inequality for African Americans is also presented in the novels through the embodiment of disability, by placing the black body on display in order to justify its deviance. Both Jefferson and Bigger are presented as spectacles in the court room, vulnerable to the showmanship of the defense and the prosecution and susceptible to the racial contempt of the audience. As their bodies are placed on display in the court room, Bigger and Jefferson are constructed as freaks—as dangerous, deviant, racial others. The court room freak show in both novels is defined as a form of spectacle, “A term that accurately captures the sensational, formulaic qualities of the exhibition space...premiered on the sensory dominance of the visual and the measured distance between the viewer and the choreographed activity of the performers” (Adams 12). In *A Lesson*, the defense urges the jury to *look* at Jefferson. As a showman, he wants the jury to *see* Jefferson’s innocence. In his argument, he repeats the word “look” over ten times, including phrases such as “look at this—this—this boy,” “look at him—look at him—look at this,” and “I implore, look carefully,” thereby rendering Jefferson’s body a spectacle, highly reminiscent of the ways in which showmen like P.T. Barnum encouraged their audiences to “Step right up!” and “Marvel in amazement!” at the various bodies on display (Gaines 7). In the court room, both the defense and prosecution construct Jefferson as a freak—a body that, as disability scholar Leonard Cassuto describes, straddles the unstable boundary of what is marked as “human”: “Freak labels disability as spectacle. The freak stands as an archetypal ‘other,’ a disabled figure on theatrical display before an able-bodied audience that uses the display to define its own sense of belonging” (Cassuto 85). The defense describes Jefferson’s physical features by imploring the jury to see that what is

before them is indeed a freakish other, a “thing” and a “cornered animal”: “Look at the shape of this skull, this face as flat as the palm of my hand—look deeply into those eyes” (Gaines 7). Just as showmen did in the days of the freak show to justify colonialism and black people’s inferiority, the showmen of the court room represent Jefferson as animalistic, sustaining the racial othering already present in the jury’s psyche.

Moreover, the defense attorney exhibits not only Jefferson’s body as spectacle, but he also uses Miss Emma’s black body as theatrical display to evoke empathy from the jury by explaining that if they punish Jefferson, then they would be punishing his innocent godmother too: “Look back to that second row. Please look. I want all twelve of you honorable men to turn your heads and look back to that second row. What you see there has been everything to him...Look at her...Look at her well...Take this away from her, and she has no reason to go on living” (Gaines 8). The defense advocates for compassion for his client while simultaneously applauding the inherent decency of the all-white jury. The criminality of Jefferson’s behavior can only be balanced by the mercy of the jury. The craftiness the defense shows in presenting Jefferson relates to the social construction of the freak during the heyday of the freak show: “Freaks were what you made them. How they were packaged, how they were dressed, how they acted, and what the audience was told about them—their presentation was the crucial element in determining their success, in making a freak” (Bogdan 95). The defense is a master showman in the ways in which he constructs Jefferson as a freak, using his black body as a spectacle while also making a spectacle out of Miss Emma. These arguments function rhetorically by allowing the defense to advocate for Jefferson’s innocence while maintaining the social hierarchy of white superiority and morality.

The conservation of white superiority requires much racial maintenance, which becomes apparent through the showmanship of the prosecution in Bigger's trial. Bigger's body is also placed on display in order to represent difference (his blackness) as deviance. During his inquest, Bigger contemplates the tension and condemnation with which the public stared at him:

He saw their eyes gazing at him with calm conviction. Though he could not have put it into words, he felt that not only had they resolved to put him to death, but that they were determined to make his death mean more than a mere punishment; they regarded him as a figment of that black world which they feared and were anxious to keep under control.

The atmosphere of the crowd told him that they were going to use his death as a bloody symbol of fear to wave before the eyes of that black world. (Wright 276)

The spectacle of the black body works in a way to normalize the bodies of the onlookers, while simultaneously labeling the black body as abnormal and aberrant. Bigger's body is not only objectified, but it is also used a symbol to reify the difference and the deviance of the black body. The punishment of Bigger's black body would serve as a warning to all other African American people who would dare challenge the status quo. Bigger is led into the inquest and the subsequent trial down a narrow aisle where an angry crowd of onlookers waits for him, yelling insults and even striking Bigger as he walks by. The media snaps pictures of Bigger in order to place a visual next to their written articles like that of the *Tribune* (311-312). Bigger's body becomes a "helpless spectacle of the sport for others," as a dumping ground for viewers' hatred, fear, and contempt of and for the black body (276).

Bessie's dead body is also exhibited during Bigger's trial. As part of their showmanship, the prosecution invites the Coroner to allow Bessie's body to be displayed, in the hopes of inciting the mob's anger and to further perpetuate the savage slot narrative they construct of

Bigger, a point Bigger understood: “To offer the dead body of Bessie as evidence and proof that he had murdered Mary would make him appear a monster; it would stir up more hate against him” (Wright 330). Bigger explains his disgust, yet he is powerless to stop the show. The Deputy Coroner decides “in the interests of justice, to offer in evidence the raped and mutilated body of one Bessie Mears, and the testimony of police officers and doctors relating the cause and manner of her death” (330). The display of Bessie’s black, mutilated body corresponds to the ways in which the legal and medical systems of the United States have merged to create damaging stories concerning the black body. Both the legal system and the medical system are complicit in the inferiorization of black bodies. Using Bessie’s body is a way of maintaining the boundaries between black and white lives. The black body is presented as a spectacle to affirm black disposability at the community and individual level. On the community level, Bessie’s display serves as a symbol to represent that black bodies are not subjects but objects to be acted upon. On the individual level, offering the mutilated body of Bessie affirms Bigger’s monstrosity and supports the public’s view of blackness.

Equating Bigger’s blackness with deviance and criminal behavior is a crucial component to the prosecution’s argument, like any good showman’s presentation whose claim uses fraud as a technique to stretch the American public’s imagination. The social construction of Bigger as a dangerous and violent criminal is dependent on perpetuating a fraudulent narrative about black men. Fraud is central to the freak show and misrepresentation was integral in the construction of the freak (Bogdan 11). The manner in which a freak was displayed determined the success of the exhibit: “Showmen fabricated freaks’ backgrounds, the nature of their condition, the circumstances of their current lives, and other personal characteristics. The accurate story of the life and conditions of those being exhibited was replaced by purposeful distortion designed to

market the exhibit, to produce a more appealing freak” (Bogdan, “Social” 25). For example, during the Century of Progress World’s Fair in Chicago in 1933, the “Darkest Africa” exhibit featured environments, props, signs, music, and costumes to resemble Africa in its most “primitive form.” The background included a constructed jungle and bushes. The men wore G-strings and the women wore nothing above the waists. Drums echoed and occasionally gunshots rang out. Yet most of the performers were not “authentic” Africans—many were African American performers. Two black men from Alabama with microcephaly, Willy and Sam, were renamed Illy and Zambezi and were feigned to be representatives of the Ituri headbinding tribe (Bogdan195). Furthermore, the showmen hired a black man from New York to play the leader of the “natives,” who could swallow hot swords and walk on fire. Exhibits such as these claimed to show non-Western people in their “natural” exotic state: as cannibals, barbarians, and savages.

As part of their exhibit, the prosecution wants to show Bigger in his “natural” state. The prosecution imagines a narrative associating Bigger’s motives and actions with flaws inherent in the character of black persons. Bigger’s public identity is created to make him a more appealing freak to the public. The prosecution claims Bigger is lascivious, barbaric, and conniving. In part of their fabrication, the prosecution proclaims that Jack Harding, a friend of Bigger’s, “under persistent questioning,” said that Bigger had seen a movie where Mary Dalton was in a bathing suit and noted to him that he would be “enthralled by the idea of driving such a girl around the city” (Wright 410). The prosecution asserts that because of the “obnoxious sexual perversions” the boys practice, then it is fitting that, upon finishing the movie, “the idea of rape, murder, and ransom entered the mind of this moron” (410). Bigger is constructed as a violent black rapist whose character is inherent in his behavior. The prosecution surmises that if the rape is not planned then Bigger would never have burned Mary’s body to destroy the evidence. They argue

that it is not fear that motivated Bigger, but his predisposition to be cunning and calculating (413).

Racist and ableist ideologies converge in ways to ensure that blackness and disability are criminalized as Bigger's and Jefferson's intellects are called into question to determine the motive for their actions. Bigger is called a "moron" and Jefferson is "without a modicum of intelligence," the language that resembles the rhetoric of eugenic practices in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Coined by Francis Galton, eugenics was a set of belief and practices that was aimed at persevering the "best" qualities of the human population by creating a binary system in which individuals were considered "normal" or "deviant," or "fit" and "unfit." Advances in science, including the IQ test, worked to identify "defective" persons, while legal systems ensured that those defective persons were cast off from society. Eugenacists "used ideas of race, ethnicity, gender, and ableism to define a 'good' member of society in such a way that 'competence' and 'independence' became code words for moral and racial conformity" (Carey 71-72). The violence of eugenics was hidden under narratives of progress where racial minorities and people with all forms of disability were viewed as biologically inferior (Garland-Thomson, "Eugenics" 75). Eugenics came to transform the relationship between the "feeble-minded," an umbrella term that includes and is often interchanged with "mental defective," moron, imbecile, idiot, and lunatic, and the criminal justice system. It also helped validate the establishment of mental institutions and asylums. When it was becoming more taboo to discriminate solely on race or gender, the label of feeble-minded helped establish social control over many groups, including women, African Americans, and the disabled community by offering a basis on which to establish justifiable legal restrictions against them (Carey 62). Those labeled feeble-minded were "associated with even more insidious character flaws, including

promiscuity, criminality, alcoholism, and poverty... the feeble-minded were destined to fall into lives of crime and delinquency because they had both a natural inclination for such degeneracy and lacked the wisdom to avoid it. Such deviants could not be trusted to uphold the precious rights of American citizenship” (Carey 6). During Bigger’s psychiatric evaluation, this narrative of inherent black deviance is upheld. His attorney Max attempts to use the insanity plea in order to have Bigger institutionalized instead of incarcerated, which he feels would be a better deal than death by the electric chair. Upon evaluation, Dr. Calvin H. Robinson, a “psychiatric attaché of the police department,” declares, “There is no question but that Thomas is more alert and more cagy than we suspect. His attempt to blame the Communists for the murder and kidnap note and his staunch denial of having raped the white girl indicate that he may be hiding other crimes” (Wright 366). Certain individuals with intellectual labels such as *idiot* or *moron* were granted leniency in the criminal justice system because they were assumed not to understand the difference between right and wrong; and although Max does not explicitly call Bigger a moron or imbecile, he attempts to subvert the rhetoric of the insanity plea in order to facilitate a discussion on the degree of responsibility of Bigger’s actions. However, Bigger is granted no leniency because he is not just defined through such ableist terms but also through racist ideology that works in tandem to solidify Bigger as criminal, assuring that he will be punished as the court deems necessary.

By constructing Bigger and Jefferson as missing links, robbing them of their humanity, infantilizing them through a narrative of paternalism, using their black bodies as spectacles, and labeling them *feeble-minded* and therefore disabled, the showmen of the court room have successfully created Bigger and Jefferson as freaks, thereby implying that black manhood is indeed freakish. While during the Jim Crow Era it was more difficult to justify violent tactics

against African Americans such as lynching by the KKK, the court rooms become a sanctioned and legal space in which to reinforce the values of society. In this space, black masculinity is reinscribed and reconstituted as terrifying, dangerous, volatile, cunning, and deviant, yet also docile, foolish, moronic and childlike. The trope of freakish black masculinity permeated the court room and also saturated the public sphere. This seemingly fixed and yet fluid category of black masculinity created a crisis not only Bigger for and Jefferson, but for other black male characters in Wright's and Gaines's texts. This crisis produces a space where those characters exist in a state of suspension, often realizing their own subjectivity, but because the outside world fails to acknowledge it, the characters sometimes internalize that oppression or are destroyed by it. This space, which I label as *suspended marginality*, is implicit in the freakishness of black masculinity.<sup>7</sup> Black men in these texts are socially shunted to the outskirts of society and are also historically and psychologically suspended in time and space. Race, gender, class, and disability interlock in complex ways that work to create the black man as suspended marginal. The enfreakment of black masculinity that was constructed inside the court room and outside in the public sphere demonstrates how both legacies of rhetoric coupled with real material conditions intertwine in ways to create the suspended marginal. Language about and historical conditions of black men in the Jim Crow era led to the construction of the suspended marginal subject position. Occupying such a space is dangerous as it can threaten both the mental and physical health of the black male characters. However, this space, I argue, is often

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<sup>7</sup> I borrow from Mary Helen Washington's analysis of the collective and historical violation of black women as a starting point with which to reconsider black male subjectivity. By emphasizing the historical and psychological process in which black women grow from victims of society to more developed women exhibiting control over their lives, she labels "The Suspended Woman" as a woman who cannot move anywhere because the pressures against them are so great: "Suspended in time and place, they are women whose life choices are so severely limited that they either kill themselves, retreat into insanity, or are simply defeated one way or another by the external circumstances of their lives" (Washington 212). (See Mary Helen Washington "Teaching *Black-Eyed Susans*: An Approach to the Study of Black Women Writers" in *All of the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us are Brave* (1982). Ed. By Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith.)

difficult, but important, for the black male characters to identify as sometimes they are unaware of this subject position, meaning they do not know where they are, or they understand that they are indeed occupying such an uncanny space, yet lack the words to articulate it. Suspended marginality is a position that was constructed for black men, not by them, which is demonstrated during Bigger's and Jefferson's trials as they remain silent while the showmen create narratives about them. Both the material and rhetorical conditions work in ways to create the suspended marginal subject position that becomes apparent in *Native Son* and *A Lesson*. In the texts, the black male characters ask themselves, "Where am I"? "How did I get here"? "Where do I go from here"? Richard Wright presents such existentialist thought in "How Bigger was Born" as he explains how *Native Son* was created. Wright comments, "There are meanings in my book of which I was not aware until they literally spilled out upon the paper. I shall sketch the outline of how I *consciously* came into possession of the materials that went into *Native Son*, but there will be many things I shall omit, not because I want to, but simply because I don't know them" ("How Bigger was Born," emphasis original 434). Here, I think Wright is attempting to articulate the suspended marginal subject position. He acknowledges the existence of this space albeit in his subconscious.

Perhaps a starting point with which to identify this space is to return to the interlocking of both racist and ableist ideology that was present in eugenics: "The eugenics era portrays the death of disabled people as beneficial to the nation, but Black people's lives were valued as exploitable labor" (Chapman, Carey, and Ben-Moshe 8-9). Black men were both racialized and disabled in ways that surmised that the black male body needs to be both disposed of yet preserved. It is this contradiction that makes the black man's task so difficult at navigating the space of suspended marginality. His blackness makes him valuable for society in terms of his

labor and as an “other” to white masculinity, yet it is this same blackness that is disabling and therefore disposable. In *Native Son*, both the defense and the prosecution equate race with disability in two explicit instances. The prosecution explains that the Daltons had hired Bigger to be their driver because Mr. Dalton “specific[ed] in his request that he want[ed] a boy who is handicapped either by race, poverty, or family responsibility” (Wright 409). The prosecution argues that to be poor or black is then to be handicapped—to be disabled. Max also equates blackness with disability when he pleads to the jury, “A man’s life is at stake. And not only is this man a criminal, but he is a black criminal. And as such, he comes into this court under a handicap, notwithstanding our pretensions that all are equal before the law” (382). Race and disability are collapsed in manners that have violent consequences for Bigger. Bigger reflects his frustration with white dominance in his reflection after Bessie’s body is displayed, revealing the ways in which black people are subject to white rule: “Not only had he lived where they told him to live, not only had he done what they told him to do, not only had he done these things until he had killed to be quit of them; but even after obeying, after killing, they still ruled him. He was their property, heart and soul, body and blood; what they did claimed every atom of him, sleeping and waking; it colored life and dictated the terms of death” (Wright 331-332). Under the reigns of Jim Crow, black men were playing a very dangerous game of chess, one in which the outcome was often already predetermined.

As the American public constructs black men as criminal, freakish, and violent and also as black men are emasculated both outside and inside the African American community, Wright and Gaines suggest that black masculinity is constantly being defined without black men’s voices themselves. So how, then, do black men attempt to assert their own humanity and resist, (re)construct, (re)create their own sense of masculinity in a society that relegates them to the

suspended marginal position? Both authors seem to maintain that the racial conditions of Jim Crow are so suffocating and severe for black men that occupying such a space in the American social hierarchy can ultimately lead to defeat, resistance, death, and even insanity. In their texts, Gaines and Wright explore both the ways in which black masculinity is constructed by outside factors and the multifaceted ways in which black men navigate the space of suspended marginality.

One way in which the black male characters contend with their suspended marginality is to admit defeat—by accepting the negative narratives about them, and at times, even becoming complicit in their own oppression. Matthew Antoine, Grant’s mixed-race school teacher and predecessor, represents the black male psyche defeated. Antoine believes in the hierarchy of the races and hates himself for having mixed skin. Although he feels superior to Grant and other dark-skinned people because he is lighter, he admits to Grant that he believes whites are superior. When Grant disagrees, Antoine remarks, “Just stay here long enough. He’ll make you the nigger you were born to be” (Gaines 65).<sup>8</sup> Antoine sees in Grant the man he used to be— young, eager, optimistic. Yet, experiencing decades of oppression living as a mixed-race person in Louisiana broke his spirits. Although Grant acknowledges that he does not like Antoine nor respect him, and Antoine makes it known that he hates Grant, Grant admits that he needs Antoine to tell him about life—things he could not learn from a formal education (64-65). Grant asserts that although he had learned reading and arithmetic, no one had ever taught him about dignity, identity, loving and caring because white people did not think black people were capable of those things (192). Both Antoine and Grant are teachers, and as such have a tremendous responsibility of educating the future generation, but the tense social environment renders this

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<sup>8</sup> Gaines explores the similar notion of the emasculation of black males in his short story “Three Men.” See Ernest J. Gaines *Bloodline* (1963).

responsibility a burden at times. The conditions of Grant's teaching environment have changed very little since he was a pupil. Grant explains his frustrations with the inadequate learning environment allotted to African American children in the Jim Crow South. They receive inferior accommodations (the all-black school housed primer through sixth grade and all of the instruction takes place in one room of a poorly ventilated church), materials (there are scarcely enough books for every student and there are no funds to buy them new or updated materials), and access (since the school is located on a plantation the children are needed in the field six months out of the year). One day, Grant looks out the window at the children chopping wood for the upcoming winter months and wonders how much has really changed for the black man since he was a pupil in Antoine's class collecting wood himself: "What am I doing? Am I reaching them at all? They are acting exactly as the old men did earlier. They are fifty years younger, maybe more, but doing the same thing those old men did who never attended school a day in their lives. Is it just a vicious circle? Am I doing anything?" (Gaines 62). While the majority of the novel follows Grant as he grapples with his state of suspended marginality, a part focuses on Matthew Antoine, whose future is already cemented. Antoine accepts a fatalistic view of teaching as he asserts that it is impossible in five and a half months to "wipe away—peel—scrape away the blanket of ignorance that has been plastered and replastered over those brains in the past three hundred years" (64). Antoine argues that the effects of slavery and being treated as second class citizens have been so detrimental to the psyche of African Americans that it is nearly impossible to correct it and even futile to resist it. He advises Grant against attempting to heal the battered psyches of his pupils. Antoine argues that the racial environment of the South is so toxic that no black man could prosper here, and therefore their only option is escape:

[He] had told us then that most of us would die violently, and those who did not would be brought down to the level of beasts. Told us that there was no other choice but to run and run. That he was living testimony of someone who should have run. That in him—he did not say all this, but we felt it—there was nothing but hatred for himself as well as contempt for us. He hated himself for the mixture of his blood and the cowardice of his being, and he hated us for daily reminding him of it...He could teach any of us only one thing, and that one thing was flight. Because there was no freedom here. (Gaines 62-63)

Similar to the dehumanization of Jefferson and Bigger in their court trials, Antoine understands that black men are dehumanized under the American social system, especially in the South. He becomes a showman in the sense that he projects a narrative of violence and dehumanization upon his pupils, turning them into freaks by forcing his conception of black masculinity onto them. Antoine maintains that there is no space for black men to assert their own subjectivity in a place that treats them with unrestrained violence. He suggests that black manhood cannot exist in the South under the current racial climate. While Antoine urges Grant to flee from the South in order to reconstruct his identity, Wright's text responds to the issue of black flight by suggesting that the North offers no such refuge. *Native Son* demonstrates that Jim Crow has a hold not just on the South, but its venom has poisoned all of America.

Under Jim Crow, white men maintained the construction of black masculinity, helping to define who or what black men were while assuring that those same men accepted their inferior status. In *A Lesson*, Grant is surrounded by white men who continually emasculate him, relegating him to the suspended marginal position. During the superintendent's annual visit to Grant's class, the superintendent treats the students as subservient animals and is constantly condescending to Grant. Grant introduces himself to Dr. Joseph as Grant Wiggins, yet Dr. Joseph

prefers to call him “Higgins.” Grant corrects him and, much to Grant’s resentment, Dr. Joseph continues to refer to him as “Higgins” for the entirety of his visit. Throughout his visit, Dr. Joseph inspects each grade, from primer to sixth grade by calling on someone who “looked half bright,” then calling on someone “whom he felt was just the opposite” (Gaines 56). Dr. Joseph would ask the frightened children, who “stood as still and as straight as soldiers for inspection,” to complete various tasks including saying the pledge of allegiance or reciting a bible verse, and to nearly every child on whom he called, he would have them hold out their arms and turn them over while he inspected them for cleanliness (55). To the upper grades he would inspect their teeth and have the children open their mouths as far as they would go. Disgusted by the way in which Dr. Joseph commands the room, yet powerless to stop it, Grant reflects that Dr. Joseph’s treatment of his students reminds him of what he learned in university: “I had read about slave masters who had done the same when buying new slaves, and I had read of cattlemen doing it when purchasing horses and cattle. At least Dr. Joseph had graduated to the level where he let the children spread out their own lips, rather than using some kind of crude metal instrument. I appreciated his humanitarianism” (56). Grant sarcastically remarks that it would appear that by Dr. Joseph’s treatment of his students, black people had not progressed much since slavery, yet whites had become more humane in their mistreatment of blacks. This scene is also important because Gaines suggests that this sort of conditioning of African Americans begins at a very young age. Black children learn to become submissive to white dominance and afraid of white wrath. Similar to the ways in which the court room was transformed into a freak show, Grant compares the ways in which his class room had been transformed into some sort of warped auction block. Both the court room and the classroom, which should be places where all citizens’

rights are protected and acknowledged, become spaces where African American rights are constantly violated.

Additionally, Dr. Joseph indicates the black body as exploitable labor; after his inspection, he gives the students a ten-minute lecture on nutrition and work ethic. He asserts that “picking cotton, gathering potatoes, pulling onions, working in the garden—all of that was good exercise for a growing boy or girl” (Gaines 56). Dr. Joseph is less concerned about the formal education the young children are acquiring and more concerned with how well they are being conditioned to do manual labor. Pleased that they looked like a sturdy bunch, Dr. Joseph declares, “Higgins, I must compliment you. You have an excellent crop of students, an excellent crop, Higgins. You ought to be proud” (56). The superintendent refers to the students as “crop,” as merely labor-producing objects. Dr. Joseph’s remarks about the students are exemplary of the ways in which the black body is reduced to terms of labor and production, only gaining value based on the labor that it produces. The black children, then, are no children at all, just laboring cattle to perform and produce at the command of the white owner. Furthermore, Dr. Joseph engages in a psychological brain tease that white men often held over black men, by applauding Grant for being complicit in his own subordination. He thanks Grant for helping to maintain the current social hierarchy. Grant admits his fault in this process as he remarks that he hated himself for being so hard on the children in preparation for the superintendent’s visit (57). When Grant asks Dr. Joseph about more books for the children, Dr. Joseph dismisses his plea for help and instead places the responsibility back into Grant’s hands, telling him that if he gets the children “off their lazy butts,” then they can work harder in the fields to earn the items they need (58). This interaction between Dr. Joseph and Grant further facilitates the dominant/submissive relationship between black and white males: Black men will always need to ask for help from

white men, who will undoubtedly affirm their domination by helping black men only insofar as it benefits themselves. White men will aid the black if he asks for help in the fields (physical production), but if he wants to succeed in the classroom (formal education), the white man will offer no such guidance, since a formal education might encourage black rebellion against the status quo. Black masculinity is therefore defined in this circumstance as always reliant on and submissive to the white man; and as a result, black men often develop a sense of self-hate, in addition to acknowledging and accepting powerlessness.

The white construction of black masculinity is further highlighted during Grant's interaction with Sheriff Sam Guidry, Louis Rougon, and another unnamed guest at Henri Pichot's house. Pichot, the owner of the plantation where Grant's aunt and Miss Emma had cooked and cleaned for decades, summons Grant to his house to discuss giving Grant permission to see Jefferson in the jail. From the beginning of Grant's entrance into this place of whiteness, he is reminded of his inferiority. When Tante Lou and Miss Emma worked for the Pichots during Grant's childhood, Grant always used the front door, but on this occasion, Grant is led into the kitchen through the back door. The four men also make him wait over two hours for an audience, symbolizing that they have the power to control his time. Grant finally receives their audience, but the men, who already had made their decision about Grant visiting Jefferson prior to Grant's presence, make a sport out of Grant by making him request their help as opposed to simply relaying their verdict. Grant, offended and angry, engages in a rhetorical sparring match with the men, but he is careful not to upset them too much, as he had been schooled in the ethics of Jim Crow. For instance, upon entering the room, Sam Guidry asks Grant had he been waiting long. Although Grant was supposed to say "not long," he told Guidry, "About two and a half hours, sir" (47). Furthermore, Grant uses correct grammar in sentences like "She *doesn't* feel that

she has the strength...” when he should have used “don’t” to indicate his inferior intellect as a black man (48). Grant demonstrates that he has both a formal and Jim Crow education, as Guidry remarks further in their conversation that “maybe [he’s] just a little too smart for [his] own good” (49). While his rhetorical sparring with Guidry and company suggests a resistance to white male domination and an assertion of black manhood, this explanation only holds so far since as the narrator, his voice is directed at the audience. His wit does not directly affect his outcome with the white men.

Not only are measures set in place where white men are able to construct and maintain black masculinity, but in *A Lesson*, Gaines indicates that black masculinity is surveilled not only outside but inside the African American community as well. After enduring the dangerous chess game in Pichot’s house, Grant returns to Miss Emma and Tante Lou, his aunt, who demands that Grant return to the jail and take the food she has prepared to Jefferson. Grant suggests that his aunt accompany him, but she deflects, indicating that she does not have on her good dress (Gaines 78). Emotionally battered and annoyed that his aunt and Miss Emma have planned Grant’s involvement with Jefferson with no concern for Grant’s wants, Grant angrily responds that maybe he would not even take the food all the way to the jail, but rather dump it in the river. In a tyrannical manner, Tante Lou warns, “You better get that food and get out of here if you know what’s good for you” (79). Grant retorts to his aunt and Miss Emma that they are stripping him of all the dignity they sent him to school to learn. He complains that they do not understand the humiliation he underwent at the hands of Pichot, nor do they understand what it is like to enter the jail and have their body searched as if “[they] were some kind of common criminal. Anything to humiliate me. All the things you wanted me to escape by going to school. Years ago, Professor Antoine told me that if I stayed here, they were going to break me down to the nigger I

was born to be. But he didn't tell me that my aunt would help them do it" (79). Frustrated and feeling merciless under the unwavering authority of his aunt, he accuses black women of being complicit with whites in oppressing black men.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, Gaines asserts that other traditions in the African American community have the ability to oppress black men as well. Grant and Jefferson both struggle with balancing the wishes of the community while attempting to assert their individual wants. After Grant has visited Jefferson in prison a few times, the local black minister, Reverend Ambrose, visits Grant on a Sunday at Tante Lou's house to check on his progress with making Jefferson into a man. Worried about the status of Jefferson's soul, Reverend Ambrose entreats Grant to convince Jefferson to turn his life over to God, since Jefferson, Reverend Ambrose explains, listens to Grant. Grant has no interest in preaching to Jefferson and responds that he cannot carry the burden of both teaching Jefferson how to be a man and how to be saved, especially since he is not very religious himself. Insulted by Grant's response that saving Jefferson's soul is up to him and him only, the Reverend accuses Grant of being selfish and uneducated. As the moral center of the African American community, he reproaches Grant for not acknowledging the sacrifices his aunt made in order to send him to university and for rejecting the African American community's idea of communal uplift:

That's how you got through that university—cheating herself here, cheating herself there, but always telling you she's all right. I've seen the blisters from the hoe and the cane knife... You ever looked at the scabs on her knees, boy? Course you never. 'Cause she never wanted you to see it. And that's the difference between me and you, boy; that make

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<sup>9</sup> For more of an extensive analysis of Tante Lou's and Miss Emma's authoritarian rule over Grant, see Trudier Harris's article "Do What Big Mama Sez: Ernest J. Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*" in *Saints, Sinners, Saviors: Strong Black Women in African American Literature* (2001).

me the educated one, and you the gump. I know my people. I know what they gone through. I know they done cheated themselves, lied to themselves—hoping that one they all love and trust can come back and help relieve their pain. (Gaines 218)

The Reverend accuses Grant of not reciprocating the same sense of self-sacrifice that his ancestors gave for him and because of this rejection, Grant is therefore not a man. The Reverend equates Grant's rejection of religion as a rejection of the needs of the African American community—an ultimate sin. By not teaching Jefferson to accept Christian salvation, Reverend Ambrose suggests Grant is invariably forfeiting his obligatory birth right as savior of the African American race.

Black masculinity is defined then in the African American community as being willing and able to assume the burden of the race, purporting unwavering Christianity, as well as protecting and providing for the entire community. The success of Grant turning Jefferson into a man is indicative of the success of the entire African American community. Yet Grant resents the seemingly impossible role into which black men have been placed. During a conversation with Vivian, Grant's love interest, Grant underscores black men's failure to live up to the African American community's ideals of masculinity:

We black men have failed to protect our women since the time of slavery. We stay here in the South and are broken, or we run away and leave them alone to look after the children and themselves. So each time a male child is born, they hope he will be the one to change this vicious circle—which he never does. Because even though he wants to change it, and maybe even tries to change it, it is too heavy a burden because of all the others who have run away and left their burdens behind. So he, too, must run away if he is to hold on to his sanity and have a life of his own. (166-167)

All that the black man should be, Grant argues—protector, provider, savior—is undermined by systems of racial injustice that are as far reaching as slavery. The racist system that leads to segregation and disenfranchisement for African Americans ostensibly stunts any assertion of black manhood.<sup>10</sup> Grant voices his shame and anger with his aunt, Miss Emma, Vivian, and other black women in the community who expect people like the Reverend, Jefferson, and himself “to change everything that has been going on for three hundred years” (167). He explains that for the black woman, having Jefferson walk to the electric chair as opposed to crawling like a hog would be the utmost redemption of black men for black women. That way, Grant reasons, “she can go to that little church there in the quarter and say proudly, ‘You see, I told you—I told you he was a man.’ And if she dies an hour after that, all right; but what she wants to hear first is that [Jefferson] did not crawl to that white man, that he stood at that last moment and walked. Because if he does not, she knows that she will never get another chance to see a black man stand for her” (167). The act of standing, as opposed to kneeling, is a metaphorical representation of black men displaying pride in themselves and their race, therefore becoming men. This act is also ableist in its emphasis on physical strength as indicator of inner spiritual and psychological strength. Miss Emma needs Jefferson to walk to the chair in order to restore her dignity as well as the dignity and pride of the African American community. Although masked in layers of good intentions, Miss Emma’s expectations for Jefferson and Grant nevertheless still place the black woman as the engineer of black masculinity. Grant’s frustration stems from not only the

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<sup>10</sup> Richard Wright describes this crisis as well in “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow, an Autobiographical Sketch,” (1937) where he details lessons he learned about “how to live as a Negro” under Jim Crow in Mississippi. These lessons included unspoken rules that governed behavior between white and black men, and where learning to adhere to these rules could literally be a matter of life and death for the black man. One specific example points to the failure of black men to protect black women. Wright walked a black maid home from work. A white night-watchman slapped her on the buttocks, then stared at Wright and asked him if he liked it. Wright, amazed and angry, yet realizing his response could result in dangerous consequences for himself and the maid, reluctantly affirms that he did. The lesson that black men were to learn was that white men could treat black women any way they wanted and the black man was powerless to stop it.

community's expectation of black men, but also their inevitable failure to live up to those expectations. Grant feels as though his salvation of Jefferson is meant to pay some sort of decades-long debt for the dissolution of the black familial unit since slavery. This burden is placed upon the head of the black man although its dissolution has been precipitated by forces outside of his control. According to Grant, black men acknowledge this crisis, accept it, realize it is too much of a burden for a man and opt to escape it, forsaking the needs of the community in order to preserve the sanity of the individual. Ultimately, Grant remains in the community but still oscillates between remaining grounded and running away. He confides to Vivian, "I want to run away, but go where and do what? I'm needed here and I know it, but I feel that all I'm doing here is choking myself" (Gaines193).

Occupying the space of the suspended marginal presents itself to the black male characters as a sort of prison that is both literal and figurative, physical and mental. Although the space of the suspended marginal seems an impossible space to occupy, both Wright and Gaines offer suggestions that lead to ways in which the black male characters can reformulate their own masculinity by working to reposition themselves. Both authors indicate the act of writing and the power of the word as a means of repositioning. As was maintained earlier, Jefferson's and Bigger's masculinity is constructed by the showmen through both the rhetoric of and the racial environment exacerbated by Jim Crow. As language worked to define the material conditions for black males, so did the material conditions for black males work to define the language that was used to define them. Similarly, Gaines indicates that the written word has the potential to change material conditions. After numerous visits with Jefferson in the jail, Grant gives Jefferson a notebook and encourages him to write down his thoughts so that they could talk about them together during their next visit. He explains to Jefferson, who is initially hesitant about the task,

what writing would symbolize—it would help to affirm his humanity when the white man would suggest that a hog has no use for a pen and paper (Gaines192). Just as the white man had attempted to rob the black man of his manhood by labeling him subhuman, Grant teaches Jefferson about other myths that white people create about themselves and black people: “White people believe that they’re better than anyone else on earth—and that’s a myth. The last thing they ever want is to see a black man stand, and think, and show that common humanity that is in us all. It would destroy their myth. They would no longer have justification for having made us slaves and keeping us in the condition we are in” (192). To write, then, is to expel this myth, affirm black manhood, and work to redefine the black male’s role in American society.

While writing has the potential to bring short and long-term change to the black man’s position as suspended marginal, it is something that must be actualized through the interdependence with other black men. Part of Grant’s attempt to forego the suspended marginal position is recognizing that he cannot carry the burden alone and that he must confide in and encourage other black men to engage in the act. Black masculinity is then defined as asserting independence while simultaneously reaching out to the community of black men for emotional support. This shift away from complete independence to embracing a form of interdependence emphasizes a structural shift in reconsidering the values of black masculinity. It suggests that the key to survival for black men is not merely the assertion of physical and mental strength of the black male body, but the understanding that survival entails looking past the individual body to forming an extended network with other black men in the similar subject position.

Gaines and Wright are careful to dispel any exaggeration of the agency that their black characters have, as Jefferson does die a violent death in the electric chair, and in the end of the novel, Bigger awaits a similar fate. Yet, they do indicate the potential that writing has to change

both rhetorical and material conditions for African American men. They are not so naïve as to suggest that writing one novel would immediately impact African Americans' rights to equal citizenship, nor are they saying (AS in Jefferson's case) that writing in a diary can literally change one's outcome. Rather, what the authors propose is that by writing, change can occur on numerous levels and in many forms. While the goal is communal uplift for all black men, destroying the suspended marginal subject position and redefining black masculinity, both authors agree that any form of writing, whether it be for the community or for the individual, is equally important. Richard Wright said it best when he exclaimed, "I must write this novel, not only for others to read, but to free *myself* of this sense of shame and fear" (448).

ADRIENNE KENNEDY'S DISABILITY AESTHETIC IN  
*THE ALEXANDER PLAYS* (1992)

As I have shown in the previous two chapters, both writers and critics of African American literature and Disability Studies are interested in issues of identity and how the intersections of multiple identities including race, gender, and disability complicate individual expressions of and societal social responses to those identities. While in the previous chapters I stressed the constitutive relationship between race and disability in African American literature from slave narratives to the emergence of the freak show and the Jim Crow Era, this chapter concentrates on conceptions of race, gender, and disability in terms of narrative aesthetics. In this chapter, I focus on the works of Adrienne Kennedy and aim to show the possibility of black female subjectivity in African American literature through what I consider her disability aesthetic.

Adrienne Kennedy is one of the most prolific African American playwrights of the twentieth century. Having written over 20 plays, a novella, numerous essays, and a memoir, Kennedy has saturated the American theatre with an indomitable force since the 1960s. Many of her writings are autobiographical in nature, blur the distinction between past and present, dreams and reality, and expose the terrors stemming from racial injustice, geographical misplacement, imprisonment, and death. When describing her work, Kennedy explains that a lot of the inspiration for many intense themes stems from her childhood: "I feel overwhelmed by family problems and family realities. I see my writing as being an outlet for inner, psychological

confusion and questions stemming from childhood. I don't know any other way" ("A Growth" 42).

Most of Kennedy's creative output is connected intimately to her biography. Kennedy was born Adrienne Hawkins in Pittsburgh in 1931 but spent most of her childhood in Cleveland and visiting her southern roots in Georgia. Both her mother and father had a significant influence on the themes in her works as she grew up in a black middle-class family. Her mother, Etta Hawkins, taught Kennedy to read at age three, instilled in her the desire to excel and exposed her to varied texts, movies, and artists from Bette Davis and Lena Horne to Charlotte Bronte to William the Conqueror to Queen Victoria to Wordsworth. In her memoir, *People who Led to My Plays* (1987), Kennedy attributes her desire to mix dreams and reality to the hauntingly beautiful way in which her mother told her stories she often dreamed about. Her father, Cornell Wallace Hawkins, was the executive secretary for the YMCA in Cleveland and taught her the values of working for the Negro cause; he also read her stories of W.E.B. Du Bois, Marian Anderson, and Mary Bethune. Not only was Kennedy's home life cultured, but her school life was multicultural as there were Italian, Jewish, Irish, and Polish students in her classes. In fact, in her memoir Kennedy explains that although she grew up in the Jim Crow Era, she did not encounter racism until she enrolled in Ohio State University in 1949.

Kennedy's eclectic background would serve as the impetus to her surrealistic, fragmented writing style. She sees her writing as a "growth of images" and tries not to censor herself even if the results may be frightening or unpopular. As an artist, Kennedy seeks to bring the material that is lodged in the unconscious to the conscious level ("A Growth" 42). She blends the mythical with the historical, the logical with the illogical. Because her writing often eschews staging or dramatic conventions, until more recently, Kennedy has often been relegated to the

margins of the African American literary canon, and since drama is secondary or perhaps tertiary in African American literature criticism, Kennedy's works are even more marginalized. As Ishmael Reed says in his review of the novella *Deadly Triplets: A Theatre Mystery and Journal* (1990), "The highly experimental nature of Adrienne Kennedy's plays transformed the landscape of Black American theatre in the past two decades and yet, oddly, left her on the periphery of her field, often feeling like an uninvited guest" (Reed n.p).

There are many reasons Kennedy's works seem inaccessible. First, in many of her plays there is no formal plot, time and space are often disjointed, and the characters often bleed into one another, which makes it difficult to find some sort of narrative "progression." For instance, her first play, *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1962), follows the psychological battle in the protagonist Sarah's mind and is an investigation of her fractured psyche as she attempts to come to terms with her identity as a mixed-race person. *A Rat's Mass* (1966) is non-chronological and features a half-rat and half-human, black brother and sister who are being haunted in an attic. In *The Owl Answers* (1961), the cast of characters slowly changes into and out of themselves and includes *She who is Clara Passmore who is the Virgin Mary who is the Bastard who is the Owl* and *The White Bird who is Reverend Passmore's Canary who is God's Dove*. Second, the explicit violence, graphic images, and themes of miscegenation "make people uncomfortable," as Kennedy admits in a 1988 interview with Elin Diamond (Diamond 137). For example, in *Funnyhouse* Sarah hangs herself in the end and Jesus is portrayed as a hunchbacked dwarf whom Kennedy describes as "berserk, evil, sinister" ("People" 123). In *The Owl Answers*, the protagonist's mother stabs herself. In *A Lesson in Dead Language* (1968), the pupils are obsessed with menstruation and blood becomes a visceral image. In *The Ohio State Murders* (1992), a father kidnaps and murders his two children and commits suicide. In *Sleep Deprivation*

*Chamber* (1996), a play Kennedy produced with her son Adam, the narrator gruesomely recalls the nightmarish events of Adam's encounter with police brutality. Third, apart from *An Evening with Dead Essex* (1972), *Deadly Triplets: A Theatre Mystery and Journal*, and *June and Jean in Concert* (1995), nearly all Kennedy's plays are one-act, which were deemed too short for Broadway production to give an audience its money's worth on stage.

Yet it is precisely because her plays are so atypical that renders her work a crucial component to expanding the definitions of the African American literary canon and to demonstrating the value of a Black Critical Disabilities Studies Approach. Although Kennedy has been writing since she was a child, she was not established as a playwright until the 1960s during the rise of the Black Arts Movement. As Alisa Solomon contends in her foreword to *The Alexander Plays* (1992), black contemporaries criticized Kennedy for not doing enough for the movement, for being "an irrelevant black writer," and for rejecting characters who did not espouse the movement's foundational principle of black pride (Solomon *xii*). Kennedy's works, as Solomon explains, lay outside of the "conventional expectations of what 'minority' playwrights do" and thus, were often disregarded (Solomon *xi*). However, Kennedy's works had more in common with her contemporaries that many failed to see. She, like many black contemporaries, is interested in the formulation of African American identity and its complexities. This attention to the intersections of multiple identities that include race, gender, and disability also establishes her works as particularly useful to a Black Critical Disabilities Studies Approach. Like Amiri Baraka, who underscores the malleability of black identity in *Dutchman* (1964), Kennedy explores the complexities of both racial and gender identity and narratives of disability through the trope of the tragic mulatto figure in *Funnyhouse*.

Kennedy's first play, *Funnyhouse*, earned her an Obie award in 1964 and explores the complexities of racial mixing through the fractured psyche of the female protagonist, Sarah. The play takes place in Sarah's room and culminates in dialogue with pieces of Sarah's selves. The dialogue is among characters that include the Duchess of Hapsburg, Jesus, Patrice Lumumba, and Queen Victoria Regina, who all are identified as "one of herselfes," or an extension Sarah's self. In the play, Sarah indicates that she was born of a white mother and a black father and her father "diseased [her] birth" (Kennedy 13).<sup>11</sup> Sarah equates blackness with disease and her one "Negroid feature," her "frizzy...unmistakably Negro kinky hair," as a "defect" (14-15). Thus, in a non-chronological fashion replete with repetition, symbolism, and metaphor, the play follows Sarah's conscious as she attempts to expunge her blackness from her self—an act she seeks to attain through hanging herself. Ultimately the inner conflict that the protagonist undergoes is reminiscent of the trope of the "tragic mulatto" that concerned early twentieth-century writers including Alice Dunbar Nelson and Nella Larsen, albeit without problematic narrative plot progression.

Kennedy is most well-known for *Funnyhouse*, so it is no surprise that much of the scholarly work on Kennedy focuses on that play. There are many interesting and engaging critical perspectives of the play about Kennedy's exploration of identity politics, particularly race and gender, yet they offer a surface-level analysis of Kennedy's attention to disability. Disability, I argue, is a crucial component to understanding Adrienne Kennedy's conception of African American identity. In her review of *Funnyhouse*, Lorraine Brown suggests that the play is not simply about "Sarah's Blackness alone, but about the contamination of Blackness, femaleness, and education, which together create insurmountable barriers to wholeness and psychic balance"

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<sup>11</sup> For the sake of clarity, the reference page numbers I use in conjunction to Kennedy's work all refer to Werner Sollors's *The Adrienne Kennedy Reader* (2001), which encompasses all of her plays in one text.

(Brown 86). Similarly, Rosemary Curb argues that what is more important to the characters than their obsession with blackness and whiteness is their sexual identity. She asserts that in *Funnyhouse* and *The Owl Answers* the female characters share a sense of being imprisoned in the female body and that ultimately, “being female is a worse disadvantage in the struggle for power than being Black” (Curb 191). Jeanie Forte situates Kennedy’s work within the discussion of black feminist writing to address Sondra O’Neale’s charge about representations of black women in American fiction. In her article, “Inhibiting Midwives, Usurping Creators: The Struggling Emergence of Black Women in American Fiction,” O’Neale asserts that black women writers have often negatively portrayed black women in literature. She charges the image of the “tragic mulatto” figure, as written by Nella Larsen, Jessie Fauset, and Dorothy West, as purporting racist images of real black women. Forte asserts that while on the surface it would appear that Kennedy’s plays are guilty of O’Neale’s charges, we as scholars are missing how the characters in the plays invite the reader to “subject” them— “that is, to attempt to construct and read their subjectivity, only to prove, ultimately, that it is an unfinishable task” (Forte 159). In his book *Understanding Adrienne Kennedy* (2005), Philip Kolin observes the connection between Kennedy’s use of space in her plays and her interest in identity formation: “The rooms Kennedy’s characters inhabit are like their minds. As in a nightmare, place is not stable, orderly, or even known or recognizable, because space in Kennedy’s plays is not physical; it represents her characters’ hallucinations. Rooms for Kennedy never enlarge, never fill up with sunlight. They are claustrophobic torture chambers” (Kolin 21).

While all of these scholars offer provocative, stimulating contributions to the much-needed discussion of Kennedy’s repertoire, the scholars not only ignore disability as a category of difference worthy of analysis in her works, but interestingly enough, all four scholars evoke

disability *metaphors* to forward their arguments. In reconciling Sarah's hanging of herself, Lorraine Brown asserts that Sarah's death emphasizes her need to "alleviate the anguish of the present moment": "Even if such impulses stem quite understandably from the enormity of the problems and the intensity of the suffering, they are addictive and *crippling*" (Brown 88, emphasis mine). Similarly, Rosemary Curb concludes that the female characters in *Funnyhouse* and *The Owl Answers* are fragmented because of the roles they must balance as "educated Black women of diverse heritage": "The painful ambivalence which [the protagonists] feel toward their parents does not strengthen and mature them. Rather it so *cripples* and confuses them that they choose to live in a dream fantasy world in preference to the real world of daily demands... Only death brings release" (Curb 195, emphasis mine). In her article, Jeanie Forte summarizes Sondra O'Neale's claims about the negative images that have come to represent black women in American fiction in the following manner: "...Such images serve to support racism, affirming that it must indeed be impossible to be black in white culture, being forever misfit, permanently *handicapped*" (Forte 157, emphasis mine). Philip Kolin, in his attempt to medicalize Kennedy's characters argues, "Clinically speaking, Kennedy's traumatized heroines exhibit a condition that psychiatrists have labeled a 'dissociative identity disorder'..." (Kolin 20).

The point here is not to lambaste the scholars for making what seem like passing remarks in order to make connections with their audience. And it certainly is not too far-fetched to explore disability and impairment in Kennedy's work. After all, in *Funnyhouse* Sarah's mind is fragmented into several selves, Jesus is a hunchbacked dwarf, and blackness is described as a disease; in "Because of the King of France" (1960), the piano player is "crippled"; in *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White*, Wally is brain-damaged; and in *Orestes* (1972), Orestes is mad. The point here is precisely *because* disability is glaring in nearly all her works, it deserves

more than just a fleeting rhetorical slippage as a metaphor for racial, gendered, or another oppression. Using a Black Critical Disabilities Studies Approach to Kennedy's work offers new dimensions to discussions of her texts and as I argue, by using this lens her works actually become more accessible. There is, to my knowledge, no scholarship that engages a disability praxis with any of Kennedy's works and although all of Kennedy's work deserve scholarly engagement, an exploration of all her texts is out of the scope for this chapter. Therefore, I have chosen to concentrate on four of her plays, *She Talks to Beethoven*, *The Ohio State Murders*, *The Film Club*, and *The Dramatic Circle*, which together encompass the collection *The Alexander Plays* (1992) as a point to enter a conversation about race and disability in Kennedy's works.

Compared to her earlier one-act plays, *The Alexander Plays* seem less violent, disjointed, and aggressive but as Alisa Solomon mentions in the foreword to *The Alexander Plays*, "The omnipresent sense of threat that careened headlong from the previous works—threats to conventional conceptions of race and gender, of culture, and history, of plot, character, and dialogue—lurk in *The Alexander Plays* as well" (Solomon *x*). Although in *The Alexander Plays* events are more straightforward, the plays still contest the "boundaries of conventional narrative structure" (Solomon *xv*). The first play in the quartet, *She Talks to Beethoven*, takes place in the bedroom of a house in Accra, Ghana in 1961 and chronicles Suzanne Alexander as she attempts to finish a play about Beethoven while simultaneously anxiously awaits word from her kidnapped husband. In her room, she is accompanied by Beethoven and through meaningful conversations that encompass the majority of the play, Beethoven helps assuage Suzanne's concerns. The second play, *The Ohio State Murders*, follows Suzanne's college experience at The Ohio State University, where she experiences staunch racism, gets pregnant by a professor and is expelled from school, and finally copes with the murder of her twin baby girls at the hands

of her children's father. The third piece, *The Film Club*, is a monologue recited by a pregnant Suzanne that takes place in London where she and Alice, her husband's David sister, await news about David's disappearance in Accra. She develops nausea and breathlessness, and at Alice's behest, sees the local Dr. Freudenberger and joins a dramatic reading group to distract her until David is found. The final installment, *The Dramatic Circle*, is a dramatic detailing of the events explained in *The Film Club*.

Like *Funnyhouse* and *The Owl Answers*, which both feature the protagonist Sarah, in *The Alexander Plays* Kennedy creates the protagonist Suzanne Alexander, the focus of all four plays, whom she considers an extension of herself. Although Kennedy admits that Suzanne is not exactly herself, there are many characteristics and circumstances that both fictional character and material author share. Like Kennedy, Suzanne is a playwright who grew up in Ohio to a middle-class black family. Kennedy married Joseph Kennedy and accompanied him to Accra, where he worked with Frantz Fanon. Similarly, the fictional Suzanne accompanies her husband, David, to Accra where he is working on a biography of Fanon. Kennedy experienced the traumatic effects of racism at Ohio State, a trauma that is the center of *The Ohio State Murders*. The narrative style of the plays highlights Kennedy's mode of self-reflexivity.

In *The Alexander Plays*, Adrienne Kennedy employs a disability aesthetic in which to formulate black female embodiment through the experiences of her protagonist Suzanne Alexander. Throughout the four plays, the reader is privy to both the material effects of racism, sexism, ableism, and trauma that Suzanne experiences, as well as the psychological processes she undergoes in response to the material experiences. Kennedy's disability aesthetic is based upon her interest in borders and binaries. She has always complicated the ideas of borders in her work. Not only does Kennedy's creation of an alter-ego in Suzanne Alexander blur the

distinction between author and text, from her very first play to *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White* to *Motherhood* (2001), Kennedy's entire repertoire blurs the distinction between additional binaries including black/white, male/female, horror/joy, past/present, fact/fiction, and sanity/madness. She is interested in how black identity is shaped by inquiring what lies at the center and even beyond those borders. It is because her work often lies in-between borders that scholars, producers, and audiences alike experience difficulty accessing her plays. In *The Alexander Plays*, Suzanne is a black woman who inhabits borders and the crux of the plays uncover the fluidity and instability of those boundaries. Suzanne navigates these borders through four key components that I argue encompass a disability aesthetic—trauma and loss (and conversely, love and support), rhetorics of care, black women's narratives of health and illness, and issues of belonging and citizenship. All four sets of concerns are complicated by race, gender, disability, and nation. Trauma, loss, care, health and illness, belonging and citizenship are key issues that scholars, writers, activists of disability studies and authors and scholars of black literary studies both identify and uncover. By using a disability aesthetic, Kennedy creates in Suzanne a complex character that is attuned to issues of race, gender, and disability—a black female identification “beyond normative notions of bodies, lives, and persons” (Wilkerson 70). Although there are no perfect literary representations of disability in African American literature, the ways in which Kennedy constructs black female subjectivity through Suzanne in *The Alexander Plays* creates a nuanced way to envisioning black female embodiment in African American fiction.

To best demonstrate the ways in which Kennedy envisions black female embodiment in *The Alexander Plays*, I have chosen to pair the four tenets with particular plays. Because *The Ohio State Murders* is the least connected to the other three plays, involves the closest

construction of narrative progression and the telling of a complete “story,” and is the longest in narrative length, I have situated the discussion on trauma and loss, and belonging and citizenship, specifically on this play itself, since I believe it delivers the most powerful representation of those two aspects of a disability aesthetic in the quartet. I will analyze the remaining three plays, *She Talks*, *The Film Club*, and *The Dramatic Circle*, together for a rich reading of rhetorics of care and black women’s narratives of health and illness in terms of black female subjectivity.

### **REVISITING PAST TRAUMAS IN *THE OHIO STATE MURDERS***

In *The Ohio State Murders*, Suzanne Alexander, an established playwright, is invited to The Ohio State University to give a talk about the violent imagery in her work. In the library stacks, Suzanne rehearses her talk as she envisions concrete imagery of specific places on the campus and describes the traumatic events that occurred during her stay. Kennedy presents Suzanne in the play as two characters: a young Suzanne of the past and a present-day Suzanne. Both young Suzanne and present Suzanne share the stage — present Suzanne relays the information and past Suzanne relives it. Throughout the play, past Suzanne is teased by the white girls in her dorm, discriminated against by the school administrators who refuse to allow her to become an English major, and has a sexual encounter with her young, white professor, which results in her expulsion from school and the birth of twin girls. The play turns violent when the professor kidnaps both children, drowns one and stabs the other and eventually kills himself. The play encompasses Suzanne’s persistence with discovering the identity of her children’s murderer while coping with racial, sexual, and emotional trauma.

Kennedy explores the complex and fluid boundaries of citizenship and belonging through Suzanne’s succinct use of place to expose the tense, racial climate in Midwestern Ohio in the

1950s. Although the play itself physically takes place in the stacks of the library, as Suzanne rehearses her talk, the stage directions indicates that “*sections of the stacks become places on campus during the play*” (Kennedy 152). Suzanne creates a vivid spatial map of the Ohio State campus. For instance, she indicates that the Oval was behind the green, the tennis courts were beyond the golf hut, the stadium was located to the right of the Olitangy River, all of which were connected by zigzagged streets. Present Suzanne admits that the geography of the campus and the surrounding areas (downtown Columbus, the Deschler Wallach, the train station) made her anxious and visiting Ohio State now “struck [her] as a series of disparate dark landscapes just as it had in 1949, the autumn of [her] freshman year” (152). This anxiety is fueled by the way the boundaries between the geographical landscapes become markers along racial lines, indicating which bodies belong to that space and which bodies are out place. The geographical landscape is arranged to identify white spaces and black spaces and to regulate the bodies that inhabit those spaces. The ways in which Suzanne describes the housing on campus illuminates the highly racialized spatiality of Ohio State. For instance, Suzanne explains that in her dorm across from Old Union there were 600 girls and only 12 were black: “We occupied six places, rooming together two in a room” (154). Black women barely made up two percent of the female population in Suzanne’s dorm, and they reflected the overall sea of whiteness on Ohio State’s campus. Furthermore, Suzanne states that after the first year in the dorm, white women went to live on sorority row, which “seemed a city in itself: the cluster of streets with the columned mansions sitting on top of the lawn appeared like a citadel,” and meanwhile, the black sororities did not have houses and instead they “met in rooms on campus or in private homes. So [they] remained in the dorm” (159). Suzanne’s descriptions of the unjust and racialized spaces underscore the marginalization of black women on Ohio State’s campus.

The geographical landscape similarly reinforces the racial hierarchy of white superiority and black inferiority as all the white spaces are larger and nicer, and the black spaces are small, decrepit and physically located on the margins. Suzanne recounts, “I remember how I had grown to dread the blocks bound by the stadium, the High Street, the vast, modern, ugly buildings behind the Oval, the dark old Union that was abandoned by all except the Negro students” (Kennedy168). While the places themselves, like sorority row, the dormitories, and the old Union building, are fixed to adhere to the rigid racial environment embedded in the American social structure of the 1950s, Suzanne’s positioning in and out of those places demonstrates that the places remain fixed but the bodies are in constant movement. The rigidity of the geographical boundaries make it difficult for black people to navigate these spaces though, and this difficulty can lead to a constant state of angst. Suzanne explains that black bodies had to learn which spaces were safe spaces and which spaces could potentially lead to harm. For example, Suzanne recalls that she never walked on the blocks on sorority row—an all-white space—because “there was no reason for Negroes to walk in those blocks” (Kennedy159). Likewise, there were other spaces deemed off-limits for African American students: “Very few Negroes walked on High Street above the university. It wasn’t that you were not allowed but you were discouraged from doing so” (154). The process of this boundary work functions to exclude and police certain bodies.

A Dis/ability Critical Race Studies (DisCrit) perspective is useful here when considering how narratives of racial exclusion like the racial spatiality of Ohio State’s campus are linked to narratives of ableism. Scholars of DisCrit such as David J. Conner, Beth A. Ferri, Subini A. Annamma, Kathleen Collins and others seek to expose the normalizing racism and ableism processes as they occur in society, and they theorize about the ways in which “race, racism,

dis/ability and ableism are built into the interactions, procedures, discourses, and institutions of education...” (Annamma et al. 14).<sup>12</sup> The school is one of the most “fiercely contested sites” where the boundary work of racism and ableism intersect (Collins 189). As Collins argues, teachers and administrators are often the ones policing the boundaries of normal while locating the abnormal as a way to deny access to racialized and disabled bodies (195). Suzanne’s experience both outside and inside the classroom demonstrates the conflation of narratives of ability and race in the *The Ohio State Murders*. In one of her required classes during her freshman year, Suzanne takes an English course with Professor Robert Hampshire, where after a discussion of Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, Suzanne writes an essay on the novel. After she turns in the essay, Hampshire calls Suzanne into his office and interrogates her about the crafting of such an astonishing essay. He begs to know if she used any reference books to write the essay and if she has read Hardy before. He admits that the paper “conveys a profound feeling for the material” and “the language of the paper seems an extension of Hardy’s own language,” but he cannot believe that Suzanne wrote it (Kennedy 156-157). Hampshire’s skepticism of Suzanne’s work is foregrounded by underlying assumptions about both Suzanne’s race and ability. Hampshire believes that, as a black woman, Suzanne cannot possess the ability to comprehend, analyze, nor write in such an impressive manner. Hampshire’s reading of Suzanne’s ability is mired by racist conceptions of black people as inherently incompetent. The construction of race and ability occur in tandem in this instance.

Moreover, Suzanne’s abilities are informed by race, and her race informs her ability as she attempts to declare English as her major during her sophomore year, but her educational

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<sup>12</sup> For further reading see Ferri, Annamma, and Connor’s co-edited articles “Introduction: A Truncated Genealogy of DisCrit” and “Conclusion: Critical Conversations Across Race and Ability” in *DisCrit: Disability Studies and Critical Race Theory in Education* (2016). Also see Connor and Ferri’s co-authored *Reading Resistance: Discourses of Exclusion in Desegregation and Inclusion Debates* (2006).

potential is stymied by racial injustice. Suzanne describes how there were no black students in the English department because “it was thought that we were not able to master the program” (Kennedy 154). Instead, the English department secretary informs Suzanne that she would instead be required to complete a trial course to determine if she had the potential to become an English major. She completes the course and the instructor, Professor Hodgson, assigns her C’s on all her papers. Afterwards, the secretary informs Suzanne that she could take no further English courses. Suzanne requests a conference with the professor but is denied. Having no other choice, she becomes an elementary education major, although she reveals she hates the new courses (163). The department’s refusal to allow Suzanne to become an English major emphasizes the boundary protection inherent in maintaining rigid racial spacing. The refusal is also indicative of the punishment black bodies receive when they try to transgress those boundaries. Both Professor Hodgson and the secretary are complicit in policing the boundaries that deny Suzanne access to a major of her choice. She is hence out of place. Suzanne understands the role that race plays in perceptions of ability and vice versa as she juxtaposes her prior schooling in Cleveland, where she attended schools with a mixture of immigrant and blacks, to her experience at Ohio State: “[There] you were judged on grades. But here race was foremost” (154). The manner in which Hampshire, Hodgson, and the secretary label Suzanne’s body based on race highlights how racism and ableism not only define what is normal but “work to mark, exclude, and extinguish what is different or *abnormal*” (Collins 189, emphasis hers). Suzanne’s educational ability is deemed abnormal and, as such, demands maintenance.

Not only do the white administrators and teachers in the play possess the ability to maintain the boundaries of race and educational ability inside the classroom, but they also police the boundaries in the dorm life. Suzanne recounts that she was kicked out of the University after

it was discovered that she was pregnant: “I remained in the dorm until March when I was expelled. The head of the dorm, Miss Dawson, read my diaries to the dormitory committee and decided I was unsuitable. I did not fit into campus life. And after the baby was born I would not be allowed to return to campus” (Kennedy 161). The words “unsuitable” and “fit” underscore the violent racial and ableist practices inherent in the study of eugenics that was used to establish which bodies had a right to citizenship and which bodies were considered “defective” or “unfit” for full citizenship rights.<sup>13</sup> Her pregnant body further makes her already racialized body hypervisible. Suzanne’s pregnant body becomes a marker of shame and her actions not in accordance with the perceived values of the University; as a result, her body must be disposed. Although the administrators are unable to expel Suzanne from the University simply because of the educational threat she poses to the white students, by declaring a pregnant Suzanne unfit for Ohio State, they can therefore justify their denial of her educational citizenship.

The process of belonging and citizenship as maintained by the white presence at Ohio State is precipitated by constant policing of black bodies. Suzanne conveys that even in the dorm where black bodies occupied only six places out of the entire dorm, the white administrators had unlimited access to their already marginalized spaces. In fact, Suzanne reveals that the only way the administration discovered her pregnancy was because Miss Dawson had gone into her room, seen her essay on loneliness and race, which likened her stay at Ohio State to that of Tess’s life from the novel, her notes on T.S. Eliot and Richard Wright, her poems, and her Judy Garland records and determined she would not be allowed to reenter (Kennedy 161-162). When Miss Dawson calls Suzanne into her office, she does not give Suzanne a chance to explain her situation nor does she offer an apology for breaking Suzanne’s right to privacy, but rather simply

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<sup>13</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the relationship between eugenic practices and the convergence of narratives of race and ability in the twentieth century, please see chapter two of this project.

condemns and punishes Suzanne. Miss Dawson violates Suzanne and thereby treats her as a second-class citizen on campus, as one who has no right to privacy. This invasion of space was common practice for black students around the entire campus. Although, as aforementioned, the black students were relegated to the margins of the University, Suzanne describes that even in those black spaces, black bodies were under constant surveillance: “And too, we were spied upon by the headmistress. She made no secret of the fact that she examined our belongings. ‘That’s our general practice,’ she said” (Kennedy 168). For the white teachers like Hodgson and administrators like the secretary and the headmistress, policing black bodies in larger white spaces is necessary and vital in order to purport racial superiority on Ohio State’s campus.

Suzanne emphasizes the traumatic effects of the constant policing of black bodies, violent negotiations of belonging and citizenship, and both blatant and subtle events of racial inequality she endures while a student at Ohio State. *The Ohio State Murders* explores the traumatic effects of racism, ableism, and sexism, through Suzanne’s experience with racial violence from other students at the University, through her calamitous relationship with Robert Hampshire, and finally through the tragic loss of her twins. Suzanne’s interactions with white students at Ohio State, specifically the white female students, underscores how black women socially navigated an environment with such rigid racial and social boundaries. Suzanne acknowledges that other than her one friend and roommate, Iris Ann, she remained isolated and ostracized by white women on campus. Specifically, she details her interactions with Patricia “Bunny” Manley, an “overweight, dark-haired” girl, and her friends who constantly bullied Iris Ann and Suzanne (Kennedy 167). Suzanne explains that they were never invited to any of the white girl’s parties, that the group refused to speak to Iris Ann and Suzanne if they passed each other in the corridor, would giggle and close their door if they saw them coming, and even accused Iris Ann and

Suzanne of stealing Bunny's watch from the lavatory (Kennedy 167). Of her mistreatment at the hands of Bunny and her gang Suzanne expresses, "I hated them. Their way of laughing when they saw us coming into the lounge, then refusal to speak was a powerful language. It had devastated me" (167).

This cruel treatment has long-standing material effects on Suzanne as she admits that she "felt such danger from them" and briefly even thought that Bunny and her gang could be responsible for the twins' murder (Kennedy168). Even though she tells no one of her suspicions, she remembers her father's sermons on lynchings and past murders of black people at the hands of secret white groups (168). Suzanne's knowledge of the history of racial violence against black people coupled with her lived experience of the harsh realities of navigating the racist, ableist, and sexist environment at Ohio State causes Suzanne both psychological and physical trauma. As a black woman on Ohio State's campus, Suzanne experiences embodiment as rejection and isolation, and ultimately, fear. Suzanne is so consumed with the threat of both past, ongoing, and possible future racial violence that such feelings cause her corporeal pain: "I was often so tense that I wound the plastic pink curlers in my hair so tightly that my head bled. When I went to the university health center the white intern tried to examine my head and at the same time not touch my scalp or hair" and concluded that Suzanne was merely putting her curlers in her hair too tightly (168). Suzanne's experience at the clinic highlights the disconnect between black women's experiences in a highly divided racial environment from that of a white male's experience in the same environment. While for Suzanne her bleeding scalp is a physical manifestation of the psychological trauma she endures as a result of racist, sexist, and ableist violence, the intern's whiteness warrants him the privilege to ignore the possible underlying psychological concerns and instead opt to treat the physical evidence alone. For the intern, the

cure is simple, and he is unable to see Suzanne's psychic distress, while for Suzanne, her bleeding scalp represents a more complex matrix of embodiment.

Not only does the relationship with fellow students cause Suzanne physical and psychological distress, but her relationship with her young, white, professor further exacerbates this trauma. It is fruitful to frame Suzanne's relationship with Hampshire in relation to Tess, the fictional character Suzanne is introduced to in her first class with Hampshire. Suzanne shows what Hampshire indicates as "unusual empathy" for Tess and although on the surface it might seem like Suzanne has nothing in common with the fictional English white female eighteenth-century protagonist of Hardy's novel, Kennedy makes some connections between the two (Kennedy 157). Both women are constrained by the social conventions of their time. As Hampshire reveals in one of his lectures, "Inherent in almost all Hardy's characters are those natural instincts which become destructive because social convention suppresses them, attempting to make the human spirit conform to the 'letter'" (155). Tess and Suzanne are both ostracized for losing their virginity before marriage. Although it should be noted that Tess was more than likely raped by Alec, the community still chastised her. There is no indication that Suzanne was raped, but after her father, a pious minister, finds out that she is pregnant he is shocked, and sends her to live with her Aunt Louise. Tess and Suzanne both have children who die—Tess's boy from sickness and Suzanne's from murder. Both women are proactive agents. Tess seeks justice from Alec for causing her to lose Angel's love, while Suzanne seeks justice for the murder of her children.

Whereas throughout Hardy's novel Suzanne empathizes with Tess's plight, Suzanne's own positioning as a black woman in 1950s America complicates an exact parallel between the two heroines. While Tess is cast more as a "fallen woman," a term used during the Victorian

period to describe a woman who has lost her innocence, Suzanne's racialized body is regarded in a more pernicious role as she is seen by Hampshire as a "jezebel." During Christmas break of her freshman year, Suzanne tells her parents that she spent the last days of the break with Iris Ann, but she actually went and spent two days with Hampshire, which results in her pregnancy. Two months later she reveals to Hampshire that she is pregnant, to which he responds, "That's not possible. We were only together twice. You surely must have other relationships. It's not possible" (Kennedy 161). Hampshire's response reveals the underlying racist and sexist stereotypes about black women that have been prevalent since the Africanist presence on United States soil. The jezebel stereotype rested on the idea that black women during slavery had an insatiable craving for sex and actively tempted their white masters. As the myth goes, because of black women's lascivious and immoral ways, they then could not be raped by their masters, which white masters often used as an excuse to fornicate with enslaved women without fear of moral reprisal. In this encounter, Hampshire purports the sexual myth of Suzanne as jezebel in two ways. First, he denies her credibility by saying that it was not possible that Suzanne is pregnant with his child. This denial is built on the jezebel myth that black women's inability to remain chaste leads to dishonesty. Secondly, he does not ask, but rather *assumes* that Suzanne has had partners other than himself. Hampshire subscribes to the idea that as a black woman, Suzanne has an uncontrollable desire for sex and hence, she is inherently promiscuous. Hampshire's rejection of Suzanne indicates his active task to create a boundary between himself and Suzanne. He rejects Suzanne not only because of the jezebel myth but also because of the social constraints regarding miscegenation. The twins' birth represents a physical manifestation of his transgression. If it were to be found out that Hampshire is the father of the twins, then it could jeopardize Hampshire's social standing, and lead to social death. Therefore, Hampshire

kills the twins as a way of disposing of his guilt and shame, getting rid of any “evidence” of his relationship with Suzanne.

Suzanne is not immune to the threat of consequences arising out of the community’s fear of miscegenation either. She reveals to no one other than her Aunt Louise that Hampshire was the father of her children. Relationships between whites and blacks were socially prohibited and many characters in the play, including the police, the college, Hampshire, and to an extent Aunt Louise and Suzanne, help preserve the borders between the races by assuaging the possible scandal. The police are not very thorough in their investigation and although there was no evidence, they attempt to pin the first murder on Thurman, a recently released inmate who often walked the campus posing as a student. Aunt Louise is offended that the police are more interested in merely closing the case than actually finding the perpetrator: “You don’t understand. My niece is a sweet girl. A very sweet girl. All you white people are alike. You think because we’re Negroes that my niece is mixed up in something shady. My niece knows no Thurman” (Kennedy 167). Aunt Louise highlights the distrust inherent in relationships between white officers and black civilians.

When Robert Hampshire is found dead along with the second twin, Carol, a narrative of disability is evoked to cover up the scandal. One story by Mrs. Tyler, a black neighbor where Suzanne and the children had been staying after she returned to Columbus and where Hampshire committed the murder-suicide, was that Hampshire had “gone into a fit of insanity” and was “quite mad” when he forced entrance into Carol’s room (Kennedy 172). Both Hampshire’s father and Suzanne’s father pressure the newspapers to bury the tragedy as Suzanne’s father is convinced “it was the best for [her]” (173). Rather than expose Hampshire as the murderer of his own children, the University protects him and nothing about the story comes out in the papers.

Rather, as Suzanne explains, “There were stories that a white professor had wandered into the Negro section of Columbus and was killed” (173). The specifics of the heinous crime become hidden under a narrative that is so vague as to potentially identify Hampshire as an innocent victim, since it was told that the professor merely “wandered” into the black neighborhood and “was killed.”

Suzanne is traumatized by the physical, psychological, and emotional stress of the environmental factors of racism, sexism, and ableism both inside and outside of the campus, yet she responds to these injustices through the support from friends and family. Unlike Val, a black male friend of Suzanne’s, and Suzanne’s parents who are ashamed of her actions and wish to ignore the situation, Suzanne is comforted by her Aunt Louise, her friend Iris Ann, her husband David, and his sister Alice. She explains how during the early months of her pregnancy Iris Ann supports her by accompanying her to the health center. Even though Alice did not meet Suzanne prior to the death of both twins, after hearing through David about Cathi’s drowning, Alice crochets two bibs for Carol and sends butter cookies to Suzanne and David. Both Iris Ann and Alice show Suzanne empathy during her most trying times. Likewise, David is supportive of Suzanne from the first time he meets her at Mrs. Tyler’s home, where Suzanne has been living. David does not judge Suzanne nor ask for explanations about her being a young, single, black mother: “When he discovered Carol was my child he made every effort to talk to me. He sensed my sorrow. When he found out that Cathi had been tragically killed he started to come by every evening after he left the law library. He asked no questions but only treated me with such great tenderness” (Kennedy 168). After Carol dies, David insists that Suzanne stay at his parents’ house, where, at Alice’s suggestion, Suzanne remains in Alice’s room for months. Being at his parents’ house gives Suzanne a physical place to retreat where she can care for her self.

Not only does Suzanne take comfort in her husband, her sister-in-law, and her friends in order to cope with the remnants of trauma and loss, she finds love and support in her Aunt Louise who becomes a surrogate mother or an “other mother” to Suzanne when her parents shun her. As Patricia Hill Collins argues in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (1990), othermothers can be blood-related or non-blood related black women who either provide temporary or long-term arrangements for black children in the community, often when the blood mother cannot or will not provide care for their offspring. Aunt Louise is an othermother to Suzanne because after her family neglects Suzanne, Aunt Louise takes her in and scolds her brother for kicking Suzanne out of the house. Aunt Louise is older, single, and has no kids of her own. She is a source of constant encouragement for Suzanne. When Suzanne is concerned that Hampshire is ignoring her, Aunt Louise comforts her and tells her to “forget about that white man” (Kennedy 168). Aunt Louise even reaches into her own savings to put Suzanne back in school. She assumes the position of mother, friend, guardian, counselor, and confidant to Suzanne. As aforementioned, Aunt Louise is the only person who knows the identity of the father of Suzanne’s twins. Knowing what scandal and danger would occur if the father’s identity became public knowledge, Aunt Louise vows that if she is ever asked who the father is, she will have one of her former black music students to admit that he is the father instead. While navigating the highly contested racial boundaries of the Midwest is difficult when faced alone, with the support of other black community members like Aunt Louise, Iris Ann, Alice, and David, navigating these spaces becomes a little more bearable for Suzanne.

Ultimately, with the encouragement of her support system, Suzanne offers an alternative narrative to histories of trauma. While incidents such as pregnancy, racial injustice, expulsion,

and murder can all be traumatic events that could lead those who experience them into a permanent state of dejection, Suzanne recognizes the loss and pain without completely surrendering to it. She both attends to her own self-care (in the safe spaces with David, Aunt Louise, and at David's parents' house), and she also confronts the injustices she experiences at Ohio State. Although Aunt Louise and Val insist that Suzanne not return to Columbus after what happened to Cathi, Suzanne is determined to find the murderer of her child and returns to Ohio State. In the last lines of the play, Suzanne comes to terms with the death of her children: "Before today I've never been able to speak publicly of my dead daughters. Good-bye, Carol and Cathi. Good-bye...And that is the main source of the violent imagery in my work" (Kennedy 173). Suzanne responds to her successive traumas by returning once more to the space that marginalized, threatened, and ostracized her. The speech allows her the space to address the trauma in ironically the same space that sought to silence her voice.

#### **FRAMING CARE AMID TRAUMA IN *SHE TALKS TO BEETHOVEN*, *THE FILM CLUB*, AND *THE DRAMATIC CIRCLE***

In her article detailing reproduction and representation in Kennedy's plays, Claudia Barnett states that "Although Kennedy's characters tell stories, their narratives are not the focus of her plays...*She focuses instead on states of mind and of being—womanhood, fragmentation, longing—and thereby problematizes the very nature of narrative...*" (Barnett 141, emphasis mine). I would agree with Barnett's assessment of Kennedy's writing style and would suggest further that not only does Kennedy focus on states of mind and being, but that through her protagonist, Suzanne Alexander, she highlights the process of black female self-actualization in the midst of geographical displacement, illness, sickness, and loneliness. The three remaining plays in *The Alexander Plays* quartet, *She Talks to Beethoven*, *The Film Club*, and *Dramatic Circle*, emphasize the roles the individual, the community, and the medical profession have in

relation to black female care. The plays focus on Suzanne's attempt to (re)construct the self in response to both physical and psychological trauma, specifically through narratives of health and care.

In *She Talks*, illness and wounding lay the foundation for the play. Suzanne Alexander waits in the bedroom of a house in Accra, Ghana, listening to the radio, reading diaries about Beethoven, while watching the road for news of her missing husband's return. In the first scene, Kennedy introduces Suzanne Alexander, who is described as a pretty, black American woman in her thirties: "*Part of her arm and shoulder are wrapped or bandaged in gauze. Placed on a shelf opposite her bed are a group of x-ray slides, the kind doctors use to analyze a patient's illness*" (Kennedy 139). The voice on the radio gives more context for the play and we learn that her husband, David, who is a professor of African poetry, has been missing ever since the day of Suzanne's surgery, and that Suzanne is now "recovering from an unspecified illness" (140).

Not only has Suzanne had to return to her home alone to recover from her illness, but she now encounters an additional concern due to David's disappearance; he has been by her side at the hospital until he suddenly vanished (Kennedy 140). By blurring both reality and dreams, the play then works through how Suzanne copes with healing both her physical and emotional wounds amid David's absence. Beethoven's presence helps to assuage those wounds, as the voice on the radio indicates that she was writing a play about Beethoven when she became ill (Kennedy 140). In fact, it is sickness and illness that bring Beethoven and Suzanne together as both artists and creators. Suzanne has an unspecified illness and Beethoven reveals that he is deaf, what he labels a "permanent infirmity" (147). Suzanne's visible wounding is juxtaposed with Beethoven's invisible (dis)ability. Suzanne unwraps her gauze revealing her wound to Beethoven, who helps Suzanne in the process. She explains to him that since the color of the

wound is pale white, she is still sick. Beethoven inquires how long she has been sick and after she tells him two and a half years, he assures her not to worry. The process of Suzanne unwrapping her gauze and exposing her wound symbolizes her exposing her complete self to Beethoven who, in an attempt to establish common ground, decides to share a secret of his own: “For the last six years I have been afflicted with an incurable complaint...My hopes of being cured have gradually been shattered and finally I have been forced to accept the prospect of permanent infirmity” (147). Suzanne creates Beethoven as not only the subject for her play but also as a confidant. Through her relationship with Beethoven, she overcomes her writer’s block. After Beethoven reveals that he is deaf, he insists that everything she wants to communicate to him must be written down in a notebook. This process allows her the means to produce her work in the midst of David’s absence.

Kennedy’s refusal to identify Suzanne’s illness or the type of surgery she underwent is strategic to the ways in which she envisions a disability aesthetic. By not disclosing the information, Kennedy downplays the diagnosis, the medicalized model of disability, in order to highlight the individual embodied experience of illness and surgery. Even the surgery happens off stage, only leaving the wound. Kennedy does not completely reject the medical model, though. With the presence of the x-ray slides and the mention of the hospital, Kennedy does acknowledge the part that modern medicine plays in the role of sick persons, yet narratives of diagnosis, examination, and even the doctors are decentralized in favor of accentuating Suzanne’s experience of it. The play is less about the objective diagnosis and more about the individual.

While *She Talks* highlights the more physical characteristics of illness and wounding amid trauma, *The Film Club* and *The Dramatic Circle* underscore the psychosocial aspects of

trauma on the psyche of Kennedy's protagonist. Suzanne's monologue, *The Film Club*, takes place presumably back on American soil as Suzanne recounts the winter of 1961 in London where she and her sister-in-law, Alice, become part of a dramatic circle while awaiting news of David's disappearance. *The Dramatic Circle* dramatizes in real time the events Suzanne relates in her monologue. Suzanne is pregnant and she and Alice leave Accra for London so she can be closer to having the baby at home. Throughout both plays, Kennedy presents a list of symptoms Suzanne develops resulting from the trauma associated with her husband's disappearance, her pregnancy, and her feelings of helplessness. In *The Film Club*, Suzanne explains that she became so distraught from hearing no word from David that she "developed ailments, nausea, breathlessness" (Kennedy 175). In *The Dramatic Circle* Alice indicates that Suzanne had been sleepwalking, hallucinating and repeating lines from the dramatic circle. When Suzanne claims to have seen Dr. Freudenger at night outside in the garden watching Alice and Suzanne, Alice concludes that "Suzanne's mind was not at rest" (Kennedy 190).

All three plays not only explore psychological, emotional, and physical ramifications of trauma, but they also engage rhetorics of care. All the main characters, including Beethoven, Alice, David, and Dr. Freudenger, attempt to care for Suzanne, and she also cares for herself. In *The Film Club* and *The Dramatic Circle*, Alice cares for Suzanne by being a physical presence of comfort. She remains with Suzanne in London where she monitors Suzanne's behavior. Alice becomes concerned when Suzanne's breathlessness gets worse and she becomes delirious. Alice forces Suzanne to see Dr. Freudenger about her anxiety and breathlessness. In *She Talks*, Beethoven cares for Suzanne by comforting her in her time of loneliness and worry. First, Beethoven helps her work through her relationship with David. Suzanne explains to Beethoven that before he disappeared, they had had a fight over a specific scene that Suzanne was writing in

the play about Beethoven. Suzanne explains to Beethoven that she has been unable to work since David's disappearance, because David always helped her with scenes about Beethoven. David comforts Suzanne also. He was at his wife's side during her hospital stay and "made sketches of his wife's illness and explained the progress and surgery procedures to her" so that she would not be frightened (Kennedy 143). David is very involved in Suzanne's life, and they even composed poems and read together. Furthermore, at the end of the play, Suzanne reads a final excerpt from the diaries about Beethoven which details his death from dropsy. After reading the excerpt, the stage directions state that Suzanne cries then rushes to the door. The final two lines read as follows:

SUZANNE: David. You sent Beethoven until you returned. Didn't you?

DAVID'S VOICE: (*Not unlike BEETHOVEN'S.*) I knew he would console you while I was absent. (Kennedy 150)

This ending is one of the most poignant and perhaps most explicitly happy endings of all Kennedy's plays. It is fascinating because it denotes Kennedy's remarkable talent at collapsing the historical with the present and reality and imagination in order to make a statement about black female subjectivity. The ambiguity of the ending is its strength. While Suzanne is addressing David, whether he is physically in the room or not is unknown. Suzanne projects a quality of David onto Beethoven: his voice. Suzanne is convinced that David sent Beethoven because during her previous conversations with Beethoven, she discovers that David had left her a love poem in the conversation books that she had been reading in conjunction with engaging verbally with Beethoven. As the previous quote reveals, David's Voice has multiple meanings. First, he could be saying he literally sent her a confidant in his absence. Or, he could be relating to her that he placed the note in the books Suzanne was reading about Beethoven because he

knew that is who she would be reading about in his absence. In other words, he could be indicating that in his absence, he knew that her emotional investment in her writing would keep her company. While the ending is left to many possible interpretations, the point Kennedy seems to be making is that care comes in numerous forms and is not always rationally explained.

In *The Film Club* and *The Dramatic Circle*, Suzanne is posited as a sick patient, and therefore has little authority on what care she receives. Furthermore, because she is deemed to be in psychic distress, outsiders like Alice and Dr. Freudenberger at times disregard her right to dictate the means of her own care and instead opt to superimpose their agenda on Suzanne. Although I want to suggest that in the plays Kennedy does not see any one form of care as completely positive or negative, through Suzanne's experience, Kennedy does imply that at times, outside help can superimpose methods of care over the individual. For instance, even though Alice admits that she thought she too saw the dark figure of Dr. Freudenberger watching them at night from the garden, instead of validating Suzanne's concern, she assures Suzanne that it could not be. Alice reasons that because Suzanne is in psychic distress, she does not want to upset her any further. What Alice deems as appropriate care for Suzanne involves denying Suzanne her own beliefs. Alice also "forced" Suzanne to see the doctor, indicating the power struggle between those who are deemed sick versus those who are considered "well" (Kennedy 185). Being deemed "sick," Suzanne thereby becomes an agent to be acted upon as opposed to one who acts. Alice labels Suzanne as unfit to make decisions about her own care.

Suzanne's interactions with Dr. Freudenberger emphasize the often conflicting agendas of authority between the individual labeled as "patient" and the "doctor." Upon his initial observation, Dr. Freudenberger, a name presumably based off the world-renowned psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud, tells Suzanne, "I've examined you and can find no reason in

your heart or blood for your breathlessness” (Kennedy 184). Dr. Freudenberg’s initial response to Suzanne’s symptoms is indicative of what feminist philosopher Susan Wendell describes as the conflict between the social authority of scientific medicine and the social authority of the individualized bodily experience. She argues that often times if doctors cannot verify the patient’s symptoms independently of the patient’s concerns, or “if they cannot find an objectively observable cause of those symptoms (preferably laboratory test results), the patient is liable to be told, ‘There is nothing wrong with you,’ regardless of how acute or debilitating her/his condition feels to the patient” (Wendell 123). Dr. Freudenberg’s initial examination of Suzanne aligns with Wendell’s position about the inability of laboratory tests to verify or quantify all patients’ symptoms. However, Dr. Freudenberg does not simply examine Suzanne. After he tells her that he found no objectively observable cause of her breathlessness, he begins to inquire about her as an individual — he asks her about why she is in London and about her husband. After Dr. Freudenberg learns about Suzanne’s situation and that she and Alice have been going daily to the American Embassy for word of David, he concludes that her being worried about David was the cause of her breathlessness, anxiety, and sleepwalking. He gives her valerian to help her sleep and suggests that she and Alice join his dramatic circle reading Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, for he comments that the “readings will distract you both while you’re waiting for Professor Alexander” (Kennedy 186). Dr. Freudenberg’s conversation with Suzanne post-examination reveals the individualized experience of trauma that manifests itself in symptoms that sometimes may not be explained or quantified by laboratory tests. Unlike the intern in *The Ohio State Murders* who refused to look beyond the physical when examining Suzanne’s bleeding scalp, separating mind and body, Dr. Freudenberg performs a more holistic Approach, treating both the physical symptoms of trauma and its psychosocial manifestations.

Dr. Freudenberger also prepares Suzanne not only to care for herself but also gives her the tools to care for David upon his return. At the end of the play, Dr. Freudenberger reveals that it was he who stood as an apparition outside of Alice and Suzanne's window. During a final conversation with Alice, Dr. Freudenberger reveals why he invited Alice and Suzanne to the dramatic circle: "I had a premonition that David, like Jonathan Harker, was going through bad times and she, like Lucy, would become the victim of an unfair, tragic plot. I'd hoped that my dramatic circle would help her and you on this difficult journey" (Kennedy 196). Dr. Freudenberger has Suzanne and Alice read from *Dracula* to, as he explains, "prepare Suzanne's mind for the darkness [he] knew she must face" (196). The darkness Suzanne was to face would be David's return from Africa as a changed man, a man who has experienced trauma from being kidnapped, poisoned, and watching his friend, Frantz Fanon, die. Alice describes that when David returned, he "limped like an old man and his black hair had turned white" (196). Dr. Freudenberger cares for Suzanne so that she may be able to, in turn, provide care for her husband. Kennedy's disability aesthetic resists utter *independence* in caring for the individual in favor of *interdependence*, where the care and health of the individual is maintained not simply by the self but also by support of other individuals.

Suzanne's complex subjective process throughout all four plays is indicative of Kennedy's disability aesthetic. She envisions black female embodiment in the plays through narratives of trauma, belonging and citizenship, illness and wounding, and rhetorics of care. Kennedy's fragmented, surrealist, style and non-linear structure demonstrate how her disability aesthetic bridges connections between disability studies and trauma studies and between disability studies and border studies. As scholar James Berger explains, there is often a disconnect between disability studies and trauma studies. Trauma studies tends to focus more

exclusively on individual diagnosis and treatment. Most experiences of trauma are understood as “subjective and deeply individualized” (Berger 181). Yet, disability theorists subscribe to the social model of disability, find that trauma studies is misguided in its primary emphasis on the individual without recognizing the social responses to impairment. The social model of disability seeks to shift the issue from the individual’s impairment and onto the larger society’s responses to those nonnormative bodies. Another difference is that because disability theory often establishes the difference between impairment, the dysfunction of the body, with disability, the social responses to that impairment, disability theorists have been unconcerned with issues of loss, pain, wounding, in favor of a more political agenda that emphasizes access. This political agenda frequently rejects registers of pain, loss, and trauma. While not all individuals with an impairment are in pain, disability studies needs to acknowledge that oftentimes impairments *do* cause suffering and pain. While trauma studies’ exclusive focus on the individual can lead to ignoring the larger social implications of the trauma, disability studies’ decentralizing of the individual in favor of the larger society denies the individual’s experience of the impairment. In fact, as Alison Kafer argues, trauma is key to understanding different people’s conceptualization of and relationship to disability (“Un/Safe” 12).

Kennedy’s lived experience with trauma foregrounds her interest in traumatic events in *The Alexander Plays*. In *People Who Led to My Plays*, Kennedy writes that “severe trauma and trial are natural to our existence” and that “memory and longing for the past are with us daily” (“People” 90). Furthermore, she reveals her personal experience with trauma. For example, she writes that in 1953 she “enter[ed] a state of anxiety [she] had never known before” when her husband is sent by the army to Korea while she is pregnant (“People” 77). She also explains the cruelty she received while attending Ohio State in many entries in her memoir. Of her dorm

mates she reveals, “They were determined to subjugate the Negro girls. They were determined to make you feel that it was a great inequity that they had to live in the same dorm with you...an injustice. This dark reality was later to give great impetus and energy to my dreams” (“People” 69). She recounts that the open racial hatred “demoralize[d] [her]” and left her “feeling dark,” so she “attached [herself] to [her] husband-to-be and seldom left his side” (“People” 69 and 72). Kennedy identifies the conflict at her dorm and also addresses how she responded to such racial hatred by clinging to those who genuinely cared for her, similar to the ways that Suzanne depends on the warmth and encouragement from her circle of caring people such as Aunt Louise, David, and Alice. Through Suzanne’s subjective process in all four plays, Adrienne Kennedy bridges the connection between trauma studies and disability studies by exploring both the individual experience of trauma and the larger social implications of the intersections between race, disability, and gender.

Kennedy’s plays can also be a starting point when thinking about the relationship between disability studies and border studies. Gloria Anzaldúa’s seminal work on border consciousness, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), underscores the cultural collision that she, specifically, and many other *mestizas* inhabit at the “border”—being a part of two or more cultures and learning how to navigate the borders (Anzaldúa 78). Disability studies is interested in the study of borders as well, yet both disciplines are wary of how the border and disability are used as literary metaphors. As disability scholar Julie Minich articulates, “Literary and critical tendencies [that] treat both the disabled body and the US-Mexico border as mere metaphor rob both of their sociopolitical specificity and erase, misappropriate, or misrepresent the lived experiences of people with disabilities and people who inhabit the border” (Minich 38). Nevertheless, I argue that Kennedy’s *The Alexander Plays* does much more than invoke

disability and the borders as mere metaphors. Although Suzanne Alexander is not physically disabled, the trauma that she undergoes is both physically and psychologically disabling. Rather, Kennedy incorporates facets of both disability studies and border studies as a starting point to rethink black female subjectivity in African American literature. *The Alexander Plays* do inhabit the border. Suzanne's interactions with Beethoven blur the distinction between past and present, reality and dreams. Kennedy's creating Suzanne as an alter-ego blurs the distinction between author and text. Suzanne's own idea of embodiment blurs the distinction between body and mind. Kennedy reconstructs black female subjectivity through the process of rethinking boundaries.

Likewise, Kennedy's resistance to fixed categories suggests that black female subjectivity is too complex to be confined to rigid boundaries and that fixed boundaries are too restrictive to explain the black female psyche in African American women's writing. Likewise, scholar Carol Boyce Davies comes to a similar conclusion in her work on black women's writing and identity, which also makes connections between border studies and African American literature. She argues that black women's writing should be read "as a series of boundary crossings and not as a fixed, geographical, ethnically or nationally bound category of writing" (Davies 3). As Anzaldúa notes about *la mestiza*, "Only by remaining flexible is she able to stretch the psyche horizontally and vertically. *La mestiza* constantly has to shift...from convergent thinking...to divergent thinking" (Anzaldúa 79). The connection between *la mestiza* consciousness and Kennedy's writing is this thought process that resists rigid boundaries, and even rationality, in order to envision the possibility of black female subjectivity that rests beyond those borders.

## CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A BLACK CRITICAL DISABILITIES STUDIES APPROACH

In this project, I have tried to make clear the connections between Disability Studies and African American literary criticism. Although the two fields are seldom explicitly linked, as I have shown, engaging African American literature through a disability studies lens can offer a rich analysis of the texts in terms of considering what it means in the literature to be a black subject in the United States. All of the chapters moved chronologically and thematically, each highlighting a different intersection between race and disability. The first chapter was attuned to the physical disabling of the black body under slavery, involving the narratives of Moses Roper, William Grimes, and Israel Campbell; the second focused on how narratives of disability and race were used to subordinate African American males in the Jim Crow Era through an exploration of *A Lesson Before Dying* and *Native Son*; and finally, the third chapter envisioned how a disability aesthetic has the potential to (re)construct black female embodiment using Adrienne Kennedy's oeuvre. I strategically moved across genres in order to demonstrate the array of ways that a Black Critical Disabilities Studies Approach could be invoked.

While this project does not purport to be a completely developed theoretical lens to reading race and disability in African American literature, I have suggested a foundation with which to engage in further development. The three tenets that I have explored throughout all the chapters—situating the reading within the historical context of race and disability, interrogating both the discursive and corporeal materiality of disability, and negotiating the relationship

between text, author, and context—provide key components to formulating a more developed critical theory and methodology for a Black Critical Disabilities Studies Approach. I have argued that by pursuing a Black Critical Disabilities Studies Approach, it can lead to new understandings of black embodiment.

As explicitly analyzing the intersections of race and disability in African American literature is a burgeoning field, I would like to suggest areas for future research on the topic by presenting a literary overview of historical contexts, authors, and texts that could fruitfully lend themselves to a Black Critical Disabilities Studies Approach. I will begin with an overview of texts until the turn of the twentieth century, which specifically deal with slavery, the Reconstruction, and the social, political, and economic direction of black people immediately following the aftermath of the Civil War. Next, I will give an overview of twentieth and twenty-first century texts that highlight what I have identified as some of the larger concerns for black authors throughout the century to the present, which consider both disabled people and black people. Throughout the century, black authors use their writings to explore places where blackness and disability intersect, including the collapsing of blackness as disability, the rise of institutionalization which disproportionately affects both black and disabled people, the effects of war on both the physical bodies and mental psyches of black people, and conversations about body politics and its often complicated relationship to impairment, disability, race, and identity.

Because the status of black peoples in America was legally changed in the mid-nineteenth century, the nineteenth century is a rich historical period in which to investigate narratives of race and disability historically and within African American literary texts. The reasons examining disability in the context of slavery and the slave narrative are important are because it has the potential to change the way we look at descriptions of physical violence during

slavery. Whereas generally physical violence can be read in slave narratives as a way to demonstrate the inhumanity of the slave system, by viewing physical violence through a disability studies lens, we can now think about how disability can be a marker to calibrate humanness, since it is through the possibility of inhabiting an impaired body, not the recognition of a shared existence based on race, that allows the audience to recognize and identify with the enslaved person's experience.

William Grimes's, Israel Campbell's, and Moses Roper's texts were not anomalies, and we can look to other slave narratives to demonstrate how the dual stigma of race and disability came to foreground questions of black subjectivity in the nineteenth century. Now, with the detailed project initiated by literary scholar and historian William Andrews and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, we have access to hundreds of slave narratives that have been digitized to encompass the project titled "Documenting the American South." As access to more black authors and writings about black people becomes readily available, we can strive to gain a fuller understanding of the constitutive relationship between race and disability in the nineteenth-century in both lesser-known texts, such as the three I have chosen, as well as canonical texts such as Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of A Slave Girl* (1861). Jacobs's narrative offers ways to explore notions of confinement, physical deterioration, and actions of care in the nineteenth century. As I have focused on works written by black male authors, Jacobs's narrative provides an exploration of race and disability that is centered upon the gendered experience of the black female enslaved body. Jacobs's narrative underscores the disposability of disabled, black bodies under the slave system, the brutality of the cotton screw, the chronic illnesses enslaved mothers endured during childbirth, and the resulting illnesses of the children themselves. In perhaps one of the most pivotal moments in her narrative, Linda Brent, a

pseudonym for Harriet Jacobs, conjures a plan to escape the plantation from her abusive slave master Dr. Flint, yet she refuses to do so without her two children, whom she mothered with a neighborhood white lawyer, Mr. Sands. Hoping that Dr. Flint would sell her children to Mr. Sands, Brent hides in a crawlspace of her grandmother's house for over seven years to convince Dr. Flint that she has indeed run away. She details her physical disablement due to the incredible amount of time she spent in the hole: "My limbs were benumbed by inaction, and the cold filled them with cramp. I had a very painful sensation of coldness in my head; even my face and tongue stiffened, and I lost the power of speech" (Jacobs 97). Because she is unable to see a doctor, her grandmother, her brother William, and her Uncle Phillip do all they can to restore her to a reasonable portion of strength. Although the time she spends in the crawl space affects her mobility and the deterioration of her limbs stifles her domestic productivity after she manages to escape, it is in this crawl space where her body becomes physically impaired that she becomes the most able-bodied.<sup>14</sup> She is able to control Dr. Flint's actions from the crawl space as he assumes she has fled North and sends out letters and search parties to retrieve her. Jacobs's narrative demonstrates that the body is used to negotiate power dynamics on the plantations, albeit temporarily.

While my work used slave narratives as an entry into thinking about these issues, not only can we explore autobiographical texts, but we can engage other genres of the period, like fiction, that explore issues of disability and race. For example, in Harriet Wilson's novel *Our Nig* (1859), the protagonist, Frado, experiences many encounters with illness and disability. After Frado turns 18, she leaves the Bellmont house where she has been an indentured servant since

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<sup>14</sup> Valerie Smith makes a similar argument in her article "'Loopholes of Retreat': Architecture and Ideology in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*", in *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr (1990).

childhood, and she finds work sewing for the Moore family. The narrator explains that although Frado works tirelessly and garners a reputation of being a great seamstress, her injury from a fall earlier that year leaves her lame, and her failing health soon makes her unable to work at a reasonable speed to keep up with the orders she is given (Wilson 117-118). Frado is sent to a shelter to be cared for by two older women, Mrs. B and Aunt Abby, and as the narrator explains, Frado “felt sure they owed her a shelter and attention, when disabled, and she resolved to feel patient, and remain till she could help herself” (120-121). The phrase “when disabled” indicates how “disability” was conflated with “sickness” and “illness.” The adverb “when” also reinforces the temporality of disability since Frado is only disabled temporarily when she is so sick that she is unable to complete her tasks. Throughout the novel, Frado’s health declines, she seeks shelter, and soon after being cared for, she is returned to her temporarily-abled body. In fact, because her declining health makes it difficult for her to support herself and soon after, her child, Frado explains in the preface that writing this narrative is a result to gain support in such means: “Deserted by kindred, disabled by failing health, I am forced to some experiment which shall aid me in maintaining myself and child without extinguishing this feeble life” (4).

While disability is identified in *Our Nig* as failing health that can temporarily or permanently hinder one’s ability to work, in Frances Ellen Watkins Harper’s novel *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted* (1892), racial passing is a constant subject, and disability is evoked to describe racial injustice and moral character. Iola Leroy’s uncle, Robert, advocates for the advantages of passing for white, while Iola feels that a rejection of blackness is a rejection of self. Robert underscores the dual stigma of race and disability when he insists that there is a “virulence of caste prejudice and the disabilities which surround the colored people when you cast your lot with them” (Harper 202). During a conversation between Iola and Robert about their friend Dr.

Latimer, who refuses to pass, Iola challenges Robert's view that passing for a white person would afford far more advantages than casting one's lot with the black race. In contrast, Iola explains to her uncle that in not passing, Dr. Latimer solidified himself as a man of dignity and honor instead of living a life in a veil of concealment, haunted by fear of exposure: "It were better that he should walk the ruggedest paths of life a true man than tread the softest carpets a moral cripple" (266). Through this conversation of passing, the intertwining of race and disability comes to the forefront. Disability is used as a metaphor to describe the crises of being a mixed-race person in the antebellum South. Robert equates blackness with disability, yet Iola argues that, in choosing to live a life of blackness, Dr. Latimer can then become morally able-bodied. Disability, then, becomes the category of difference that calibrates the moral compass for black characters like Dr. Latimer.

Similarly, Booker T. Washington forms connections between disability and morality in his autobiography, *Up from Slavery* (1901). While Washington does not use disability as a metaphor for morality, he explains how a physical presence of disability helped shape his moral compass. In *Up from Slavery*, Washington writes in detail about his relationship with General Samuel Armstrong, founder of the Hampton Institute where Washington attends as a student, who became instrumental in shaping Washington's philosophy and teaching. Washington describes General Armstrong's commitment to education, not just to help ameliorate the status of African Americans in society but also to help the poor white man. Washington is encouraged by General Armstrong's fervor, especially in his older years as Washington indicates that a year before he died, General Armstrong was "stricken with paralysis" and "lost the use of his limbs to such an extent that he was practically helpless" (Washington 293). Yet, despite his impairment, as Washington notes, General Armstrong never ceased fighting for educational rights for the

disenfranchised and spent two months living with Washington and advancing the impact of the Tuskegee Institute and the social climate of the South: "...although almost wholly without the use of voice or limb, he spent nearly every hour in devising ways and means to help the South...At the end of his visit I resolved anew to devote myself more earnestly than ever to the cause which was so near his heart. I said that if a man in his condition was willing to think, work, and act, I should not be wanting in furthering in every possible way the wish of his heart" (294). Washington's relationship with this white, disabled man and his impact on Washington, reveals that a disability presence is vital in Washington's evolution as an advocate for social, political, and economic gain for African Americans, especially in the South.

As an extension of Washington's concerns for African American progress in the new century, during the twentieth century, many black authors turned from establishing the humanity of the black subject, which was the concern for authors of slave narratives, to defining the emancipated, yet still discriminated against black subject. As these authors show, the racist and ableist practices of the nineteenth century and before still have a stronghold on the social, economic, and political status of black people in the new century. Authors such as James Weldon Johnson and Suzan-Lori Parks both explore the ways in which narratives inherent in the remnants of slavery, the practice of eugenics, and the effects of scientific racism, still manifest themselves in the new century in ways that work perpetually to oppress black people. Both authors demonstrate how racist practices place black bodies on display to suggest that those bodies are diametrically opposed to white bodies, and are both deviant and defective.

Suzan-Lori Parks's play *Venus* (1996) provides a great opportunity to extend the impact of the freak show in constructing black bodies that I proposed in my second chapter. Parks's drama is based on the historical life of Saartjie Baartman, or better known as her stage name, The

Venus Hottentot. Parks's play tells the story of Baartman's capture from Africa to becoming a main attraction in a traveling freak show in nineteenth century Britain and France. Baartman was showcased because of her "freakishly" large buttocks, better known as *steatopygia*. After her death in Paris in 1815, her remains were dissected by French naturalist George Cuvier in order to "prove" his theory that the African and their ancestors were inherently subhuman and placed on display in a museum in Paris until the late twentieth century. The play blends history and fiction to explore notions of colonization and exploitation as they play out in both inside the freak show and in the public sphere. Like *Incidents*, *Venus* offers a gendered perspective on the spectacle of disability and race as the historical subject and the author are both black women.

Although James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), does not use the freak show as setting as in Parks's *Venus*, the protagonist's childhood crisis with his mixed-race skin is akin to the ways in which black bodies were placed on display in the freak show. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator, unaware of his mixed race, is enrolled in a public school in Connecticut where the principal comes into the classroom and asks all the white children to stand. The narrator stands along with some of the other children, but is asked to sit down. The narrator is confused as he hears other children whispering that they always knew he was colored. He goes home to examine his own features in the mirror and then inquires of his mother if he is white and if she is white. The narrator explains that for the first time he critically looked at his mother: "I had thought of her in a childish way only as the most beautiful woman in the world; now I looked at her searching for defects. I could see that her skin was almost brown, that her hair was not so soft as mine, and that she did differ in some way from the other ladies who came to the house... She must have felt that I was examining her, for she hid her face in my

hair” (Johnson 8). The narrator symbolically places his mother on display, to look for her defect—her blackness.

Black authors of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries not only discuss how blackness in America is seen culturally deviant and defective, but they also further develop complicated identity politics when impairment is inscribed upon these black bodies. There are many characters in African American texts who are considered disabled, impaired, or diseased, that deserve more scholarly attention. Take for example Raymond Andrews’s novel, *Appalachee Red* (1978), which is looming with a disability presence. Many of the characters are missing limbs, diseased, or mad. There is Uncle Isaac, one of the main characters, a “nearly deaf and blind...half-senile old man” who frequents Sam’s bar (Andrews 109). There is Little Bit, who is deemed insane after she refuses to believe that her husband, Big Man Thompson, is dead after he is murdered by members of the Ku Klux Klan. There is Big Apple, who on a trip to New York gets sick and sees the nearby town doctor, Doctor Allen. The doctor examines Big Apple and determines him delirious but instead of having him “committed to the crazy farm down at Milledgeville, got in immediate touch with the county’s board of health and finally persuaded them to take him into the already overcrowded Muskhogean poorhouse,” where he remains for thirteen years (Andrews 105). Yet, in Andrews’s novel, disability is not just reserved for the black characters but the non-black as well. For instance, in the beginning of the novel, we are introduced to Jake Turner, “a tall redbearded man who became known among ‘his niggers’ as ‘Ol’ Crip’ because of the clubfoot that dangled at the end of his left leg and which, during those rare times he was ever seen walking, seemed to drag behind the rest of his body of its own volition” (Andrews 27). There is also the town’s chief of police, Clyde “Boots” White, whose sightless right eye was carved out by Little Bit. The impairments and disabilities of Andrews’s

characters signal an important part of that character's history, indicating that histories of the individual bodies work to tell the collective history of Appalachia. Andrews's novel underscores the importance both black and disabled bodies have on the foundational fabric of American identity.

Andrews's novel is unique in comparison to other texts in the African American literary tradition, in that nearly half of his characters could be considered disabled, but there are other authors who create disabled characters that are important to the text. Authors such as Wallace Thurman and Dolores Phillips situate race and disability into their younger characters. Wallace Thurman's novel, *The Blacker the Berry* (1929), was one of the first novels to explore color discrimination within the black community. The novel follows Emma Lou, who is described as a very dark, yet beautiful, young woman as she strives to find acceptance in black social circles, from college to adulthood, that shun her because of her skin tone. She meets and falls in love with Alva, a lighter-skinned African American man, who woos Emma Lou, but breaks her heart and ends up entering into a relationship with her friend, Geraldine. Alva and Geraldine have a child with impaired limbs, a "sickly, little 'ball of tainted suet,'" as Alva called it: "It had a shrunken left arm and a deformed left foot... There was a chance that the infant's limbs could be shaped into some semblance of normality. Alva declared that it looked like an idiot. Geraldine had a struggle with herself, trying to keep from smothering it. She couldn't see why such a monstrosity should live" (Thurman 124). Geraldine's and Alva's baby is considered by Geraldine's mother a punishment from God, since the two live unwed under the same roof. After a year, Geraldine, unable to stand the sight of her child, declares the baby an idiot and abandons both the baby and Alva.

Through his depiction of Geraldine's and Alva's baby, Thurman underscores the consequences of being black and disabled in a racist and ableist society. As scholars and activists Syrus Ware, Joan Ruzsa, and Giselle Dias argue in their article "It Can't be Fixed Because It's Not Broken: Racism and Disability in the Prison Industrial Complex," racism and ableism affect disabled and racialized people in many ways: "The ableist assertion that intelligence governs value and usefulness in society is intertwined with characterizations of racialized people as inherently without value because of perceived intelligence, making it all the more complicated for racialized disabled people to be considered valuable in an ableist racist society" (168). Geraldine's and Alva's baby is considered unintelligent and therefore without value. When both Geraldine and Alva consider murdering the baby, they justify its death by indicating that "no one would have questioned the accidental death of an idiot child" (Thurman 126). Thurman highlights the stigma associated with racialized and disabled people by exposing the cultural conception that racialized and disabled people are considered a burden to society. The stigma associated with racialized disabled people, like Alva's and Geraldine's baby, yields such negative consequences that Geraldine's and Alva's relationship dissolves, with Geraldine leaving the family and Alva becoming an alcoholic.

Akin to the disposability of both Bigger and Jefferson in *Native Son* and *A Lesson Before Dying*, both black bodies and disabled bodies are considered undesirable in Thurman's novel; however, in Dolores Phillips's debut novel *The Darkest Child* (2004), the construction of the black disabled character is considered undesirable, but not disposable. The novel follows the life of the Quinn family, the tyrannical mother Rozelle, and her ten children, one of which is Martha Jean, who is considered by the narrator and her sister, Tangy Mae, a "defective replica of [their] mother" (Phillips 9). Martha Jean is deaf and mute and her mother, who considers her a

“dummy” yet treats her as an indentured servant for the household, forces Martha Jean to cook, clean, and care for the babies Rozelle continues to have out of wedlock (10). Although Rozelle considers it a waste of time, the siblings teach Martha Jean sign language so they can communicate (13). Martha Jean’s presence in the novel is indicative of narratives of ability since, although Rozelle labels Martha Jean as worthless and disabled, it is Martha Jean who becomes the main caretaker for the family, and she is the only child who enters into a successful marriage—with Velman, a postal worker. Martha Jean’s presence is not indicative of David T. Mitchell’s and Sharon L. Snyder’s “narrative prosthesis,” but rather as character replete with difference and how that character navigates the same environment with those who are considered temporarily able-bodied.

In contrast to both Thurman and Phillips’s novels that position impairment in black youth, Arna Bontemps’s short story “A Summer Tragedy” (1933) situates impairment alongside aging. In this tragic story, Jeff Patton and his wife, Jennie, prepare for a trip that Bontemps does not reveal to the reader. Jeff, an old sharecropper who “limp(s) heavily on his bad leg,” suffered a stroke in the past that “had made him lame,” and Jennie is a frail and blind woman (Bontemps 56 and 61). The story follows their journey as they put on their best clothes, leave their house for one last time, drive through their rural town, and eventually intentionally drive into the river, where they commit suicide. The story gives an interesting perspective on age and ability because throughout the story, the narrator details the specific work that Jeff was able to do in the past that because of the wear and tear on the body over the years, he is no longer able to produce as much. Jeff and Jennie plan their suicide together, and although both exhibit fear of ending their lives, they ultimately go through with their plans. Jeff reasons that it is because of his decaying body that now he deems himself as disposable as the narrator explains, “Jeff thought of the handicaps,

the near impossibility, of making another crop with his leg bothering him more and more each week. Then there was the chance that he would have another stroke...” (61). Jeff views his worth in relation to the work he is able to do and views the ailments that come with age, like a stroke, as possibly causing undo stress on his wife, whom he says that having another stroke and forcing his wife to have to take care of him would be “worse off than [being] dead” (63).

Additionally, black authors of the twentieth and twenty-first century are also interested in the effects war and incarceration have on black and disabled bodies. As Disability Studies scholar Liat Ben-Moshe argues in “Disabling Incarceration: Connecting Disability to Divergent Confinements in the USA,” the relationship between disability and imprisonment has been undeveloped in disability studies. She argues that in order to conceptualize incarceration as a “continuum and a multi-faceted phenomenon,” we must broaden our conceptualization of incarceration to include a wide variety of enclosed settings, “including prisons, jails, detention centers, institutions for the intellectually disabled, treatment centers, and psychiatric hospitals” (Ben-Moshe 387). I suggest that four authors—Toni Morrison, August Wilson, Etheridge Knight, and Chester Himes—heed Ben-Moshe’s call by exploring the intersecting places and spaces where black and disabled bodies are disposed.

Both Morrison’s novel *Sula* (1973) and Wilson’s play *Fences* (1983) present black male characters who are physically and psychologically changed as veterans of war. *Sula* begins with the character Shadrack, a socially marginalized World War I veteran who institutes National Suicide Day as an attempt to control the uncertainty and fear of death. Suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Shadrack endures institutionalization and stigmatization; the resulting isolation from the community underscores the conundrum people with mental illness face which is exacerbated by race. Towards the beginning of the novel, the narrator recounts Shadrack’s

experience fighting in 1917 France, where Shadrack struggles to comprehend the intense situation of the war around him. Shadrack experiences shell shock during the battle when he looks over and sees the “face of a soldier near him fly off” (Morrison 8). This scene ends rather abruptly as, in the very next scene, the reader finds Shadrack in an institution, being confined to a straitjacket.

Likewise, in the play *Fences* (1983), August Wilson presents Gabriel, the younger brother of the protagonist Troy Maxson: “...he is seven years younger than Troy. 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” (Wilson 24). After some kids tease Gabriel and he chases them, Gabriel gets arrested by the police for disturbing the peace and the judge wants to recommit him to a mental institution. Troy’s wife, Rose, thinks that may be the best place for Gabriel, but Troy resists and insists that it is the war that made him that way and Gabriel should not have to continue to suffer for fighting for his country. Troy argues that the injury itself is penance enough: “Don’t nobody wanna be locked up, Rose. What you wanna lock him up for? Man go over there and fight the war...get half his head blown off...and they give him a lousy three thousand dollars. And I had to swoop down on that” (Wilson 28). Troy explains the complexities with caring for a wounded veteran. He rationalizes that there is no monetary value that would compensate for the physical and psychological damage Gabriel suffered from the war. Yet, at that the same time, that “lousy three thousand dollars” is the only way that Troy and his family have a roof over their head, as Rose justifies that because Gabriel could not manage his own money, Troy had to take up that responsibility.

Both Gabriel’s and Shadrack’s positioning in the texts poses a few similarities. First, it represents how war impairs both mind and body of those who fight for their country. Shadrack

and Gabriel demonstrate the damaging consequences of war to both the physical, emotional, and psychological well-being of the veterans. Secondly, it emphasizes the often involuntary commitment of war veterans in a system where there is little access to adequate care. While readers are privy to both Rose's and Troy's opinion about Gabriel's well-being, we are not given access to Gabriel's thoughts about his *own* needs and care. Similarly, because of the abrupt change in scene from Shadrack on the battlefield to his experience in the hospital, we as readers can assume that Shadrack did not voluntarily check himself in to the mental institution. Morrison and Wilson underscore the pathologization of black war veterans and society's failure to provide adequate care for those people whose bodies and minds become impaired and disabled because of serving their country. Both Gabriel's and Shadrack's experiences with mental institutions highlight that, quite often, black bodies are punished as opposed to cared for, as a result of wounds arising from war.

Etheridge Knight and Chester Himes use real life experience to reveal other places where black bodies are punished—specifically the prison system. Knight's poem "Hard Rock Returns to Prison from the Hospital for the Criminal Insane" (1968) and Himes's short story "To What Red Hell" (1934) both speak to the lived experiences of black people in the criminal justice system. Himes's short story is based on the 1930 prison fire in Ohio that Himes witnessed, where hundreds of convicts were killed. It follows the protagonist, Jimmy, as he runs back and forth through the scene of carnage. Throughout the story, Jimmy describes how both prisoners and policeman respond to the catastrophe. Some people attempt to save those trapped inside the prison, some people are praying, others are playing dice, and still others are robbing the dead of their belongings. On the other hand, Knight's poem relives the damaging consequences of shock treatment on black bodies, as the narrator details Hard Rock's, the protagonist's, lobotomy. Hard

Rock had been one of the toughest prisoners and was “known not to take no shit/ From nobody” (lines 1-2). In order to break the “crazy nigger,” the prison doctors decide to lobotomize him to make him more docile and use him as a lesson to other prisoners (line 20). The rest of the poem details a few tests Hard Rock encounters to determine if the lobotomy was successful in taming him—which the narrator indicates it has been. Poems like Knight’s and short stories like Himes’s are important to a Black Critical Disabilities Studies Approach because, even though they are works of fiction, they bring to the forefront experiences of black people in the criminal justice system. Both Himes and Knight spent extensive time in prison, both for armed robbery, and their writing exposes the dangers of the prison system for black and disabled bodies.

Not only would a Black Critical Disabilities Studies Approach be useful in thinking about the various intertwinings of race, gender, and disability in African American texts, but it can also be valuable in an analysis of works by non-black authors who represent race and disability in their texts. A useful place to begin thinking through representations of black and disabled characters by white authors is through depictions of characters labeled mad. Although non-black authors do include representations of black, male, mad characters—like Three-Fingered Jack in William Earle’s *Obi: Or, History of the Three-Fingered Jack* (1800)—I offer here a brief commentary of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), because it is one of the most frequently canonized English texts, alongside Sue Monk Kidd’s *The Secret Life of Bees* (2002), because it is a contemporary and highly popular text, in which both portray mad, black women.

Charlotte Brontë portrays in *Jane Eyre* a Creole character, Bertha Mason, whom one of the main characters, Edward Rochester, marries and because of her madness, locks away in the attic so that he might pursue Jane, the protagonist. Rochester and Bertha had lived together in Jamaica, for a short time, as Rochester explains that he was not aware of Bertha’s family history

with insanity. After the two are married, Rochester learns that Bertha's mother, although falsely assumed to be dead, is actually locked away in an asylum, and Bertha's younger brother is "a complete dumb idiot" (Brontë 18). When the couple return to England, Rochester notices that Bertha's mental state begins to deteriorate as he describes her as "mad" with a "pigmy intellect" (19). Before Jane discovers that Rochester is hiding his wife, Jane notices that from the attic she heard snarling and a screeching sound, almost as if a wild beast was inside (120). Bertha becomes a scapegoat for Rochester and Jane's affair, as she burns down the house and perishes with it, and as a result, Rochester is free to marry Jane.

Analysis of Bertha's role in the novel has garnered a reasonable amount of scholarly criticism and has even prompted Dominica-born author Jean Rhys to publish *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), which she writes as a prequel to *Jane Eyre* foregrounding Bertha as the main character. In her article, "The Corpus of the Madwoman: Toward a Feminist Disability Studies Theory of Embodiment and Mental Illness" (2002), Elizabeth Donaldson seeks to "propose a new disability studies reading attuned to the connections between physiognomy and madness" in the novel (Donaldson 99). Rejecting the "madness as rebellion" trope that has permeated feminist theory as influenced by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979), Donaldson argues that contemporary readers offer a problematic interpretation of disability and gender in literary analysis. Donaldson argues that fictional representations of madness have influenced clinical discourses of mental illness and vice versa, which she asserts was the case with Bertha (101).

Even though I appreciate that Donaldson allows the space in her analysis to complicate the relationship between impairment and disability, it is interesting to note that although Donaldson's reading of Bertha and madness in literature stresses a reconfiguring of female

embodiment and discourses of disability, she does not mention race at all. Although Donaldson does seek to privilege narratives of mental difference and disability, it is at the expense of erasing race. This is a monumental oversight considering the fact that Bertha's racial and ethnic background is coupled with nineteenth-century cultural assumptions of blackness. Bertha's blackness informs the ways in which inside the narrative both Rochester and Jane and literary scholars like Donaldson have (mis)read Bertha by failing to complicate issues of race, disability, and nation. Donaldson reveals that "as someone who occasionally acts as an advocate for people disabled by severe mental illness, I approach this subject with a certain sense of political urgency," yet how mental illness is informed by race as an urgent political matter seems to have eluded her (102). She continues, "Theories that pay attention exclusively to the social causes and construction of mad identity while overlooking the material conditions of the body, and the body as a material condition, have a limited political scope" (102). However, how can we talk about material conditions of the body and the body as a material condition without including race, especially when considering the positionality of black literary characters in English texts?

This erasure between the intersections of race and disability are not only prevalent in scholarly criticism of nineteenth-century British texts, but it is also underdeveloped in criticism of more contemporary American texts written by non-black authors. For instance, Sue Monk Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees* highlights many of the anxieties pervasive in the American South during the 1960s. The novel explores domestic abuse, motherlessness, spirituality, and the gendering of public and private spaces. It also examines the civil rights movement and the resulting unstable racial relationships, as well as suicide, healing, and, especially, mental health. The novel centers around a young white protagonist, Lily, who, with the aid of her black caregiver, runs away from her abusive father, T. Ray, after he blames her for her mother's

accidental death. She finds refuge with an eccentric trio of black female beekeepers, sisters May, June, and August. One of the sisters, May, has a hyperempathetic predisposition, and throughout the novel, resorts to cleaning, cooking, and writing on her wailing wall, as a way to cope with her melancholia. May takes her life after she learns of the unjust imprisonment of Zach, a young black boy who apprentices in their honey-making business. In turn, May's suicide sets off a series of events that ultimately leads to Lily's healing from motherlessness. She finds a mother in both the Boatwright sisters and the mother within herself.

Critics have seen how May's character captures the racial prejudice of the 1960s South. Scholar Laurie Grobman reads May as "a black woman who suffers from mental illness as a result of racial prejudice and discrimination—perhaps a diluted version of Pecola Breedlove, whose madness results from her internalization of racism" (Grobman 13). Grobman is correct that May is oppressed and living in a racist society, but the cause of her death is not merely a reaction to oppression. May's death is much more complicated. Whereas Grobman's reading allows us to uncover the tragedies of racial prejudice that Kidd presents in *Bees*, it is limiting in that it ascribes only madness as a response to racial prejudice, therefore relegating the act of suicide to a marginal and negative, reactionary response. Grobman's reading of May's death follows the traditional Western view of suicide as a consequence of madness. It also conflates the categories of race and disability without exploring the complexities of their constitutive relationship.

The depictions of black madness and/or mental difference in both Brontë's and Kidd's work become problematic in that it is only through their deaths, of both the black, female, and disabled character, that allow the main, white, able-bodied characters the ability to pursue their wants. Similar to Bertha whose death warrants narrative closure for the love story between

Rochester and Jane, May's death also proves to be the catalysis evoking change in *Bees*. May's death changes Lily, as in time, she is able to come to terms with her mother's disappearance and death. She forgives her mother for abandoning her and she also forgives herself for accidentally shooting Deborah, her mother. In contrast to Brontë's creation of Bertha, whom she metaphorically casts to the margins of the novel, by creating May as a central character of the novel, Kidd allows the subaltern black woman a place to speak; however, there are larger troubling implications of using both Bertha and May as scapegoats. A Black Critical Disabilities Studies Approach can offer ways to complicate how white authors depict notions of black madness.

Ultimately, this approach opens up unexplored critical and theoretical possibilities for both African American literature and Disability Studies. It is a site for integrated research, which reflects movement in the texts themselves. By bringing to the forefront political, literary, and critical issues that are generally not prioritized in literary studies, as a Black Critical Disabilities Studies Approach becomes more actualized, this type of integration could therefore serve as a model for future research and writing about African American literature. In a society where bodies are valued by being deemed as fit or unfit to be productive citizens, I hope this project is an indicator that indeed, all bodies *do* matter.

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