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and Disability

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Blue Blackness, Black Blueness: Making Sense of Blackness and Disability¹

In *Leadbelly*, Tyehimba Jess invokes Blind Lemon Jefferson in two poems: “1912: blind lemon jefferson explaining to leadbelly” and “blind lemon taught me.” The former is written in Jefferson’s voice; the latter in *Leadbelly*’s. In what follows, I plan to provide an analysis of the first. A brief description:² The speaker (Blind Lemon Jefferson) provides *Leadbelly* with advice and an anecdote. Each illustrates Jefferson’s relationship to his instrument, the guitar (metonymic for music), and the world at large.³ I unpack portions of the text to demonstrate how to read through the overlapping lenses of blackness and disability.⁴

Interpreting this poem while attending to blackness and disability requires more than finding the mention of each within the poem itself. But let’s start there.⁵ Jefferson first mentions his blindness at the end of the first stanza, as part of his explanation that “everything gotta be ‘live on you son.” He advises *Leadbelly* to “read the crowd like a fortune teller’s tealeaf, from the *plunk* of a nickel to the *bang* of a quarter to the smell of thieves schemin’ on a blind man’s cash.” The mention of blindness here emphasizes the figurative function of the olfactory change and, in contrast, the material nature of the “plunk” and “bang” of coins. Jefferson listens for those differences not necessarily because his blindness causes extraordinary hearing or smell. While Jefferson does not outright dispute the presumption of increased sensory perception, his statement reframes it such that his impairment (blindness) does not cause the problem, but his disability (the social reality that others attempt to take advantage of him) does.⁶ He listens and knows the difference because he must. He has trained himself as a mode of survival.⁷

In the second stanza, Jefferson recounts an instance of ableism where poverty, blackness, and blindness collude with the express consent of spectators. He recalls that he wrestled at a carnival to get his guitar out of hock. One man, after having been beaten (in both senses), attempted to stab him and no one said anything since they had taken bets on his possible injuries. Disfigurement (the resulting scar)⁸ and his blindness appear in the stanza as markers of difference. Jefferson’s blindness, again, is not the problem for him. It is merely an impairment. As it makes social meaning, it becomes a disability. In this stanza, it makes meaning as both advantageous and abject. In fact, the former depends on the latter. It is because others view him as weak and emasculated that they pay to watch him fight.⁹ It bears mentioning that his blindness and his blackness work together to inform narratives about his masculinity. That is, the expectation is that black men will be hypermasculine, so a blind black man’s masculinity becomes questionable because it does not conform to this standard easily. Yet Jefferson turns this into a distinct advantage. Since he is an adroit fighter, he can shift the narrative so that his blindness becomes lucrative. As a strong blind black man, he can earn the cash and the cachet based on his adherence to common notions of black masculinity alongside his toying with stereotypes about and expectations of blindness. Abjection surfaces as the narrative against which he literally fights because others desire that he subscribe to it, and when he does not, they circumscribe him within it. Two ideas interplay. It is not solely the ableist idea that a black blind man should not be able to best the (presumably white) sighted fighter; it is also the ableist and racist desire to see a black blind man bleed. The resulting scar

(the disfigurement) attached to the living body is not an overcoming narrative—one that reads him as having triumphed over his condition.¹⁰ Rather, the scar is evidence that he bested those who refused to understand his condition as anything other than abject. Yet, even though “they lost money that day,” Jefferson gives no indication that they or anyone else thinks of him differently, rendering the larger overcoming narrative moot.

Blindness should not disappear from interpretive view once we understand the advice Jefferson gives to Leadbelly. It does not serve solely as the prompt for Leadbelly’s lesson about freedom. Plainly put, blindness should not be understood as an aspect of the poetic text that appears only to be elided or erased by the two men’s shared black masculine musicianship, a problem resolved in the story’s telling.¹¹ It is the scaffolding of the story itself. In the content, black blindness creates the circumstances for Jefferson’s advice. I also refer to the poem’s structure.¹² As with the blues, blindness repeats with a difference.¹³ At first, it makes meaning based on physical limitations. Then, blindness takes on resonance as a social category, and, at the conclusion, blindness bears implications for philosophizing about how the world works. Certainly, each repetition reverberates and resonates. Moreover, the poem, composed as a prose poem whose stanzas run from the left margin to the right, begins and ends with ellipses.¹⁴ This could represent the poem’s capture of Jefferson’s “explanation” *in medias res*. Yet the ellipses index a sense of disruption—that the poem itself is a disruption, has a disruption, and/or courts disruption—for which the structure itself makes room. It would be disingenuous to count every instance of ellipses as evidence of disability, but here the structure reflects the content insofar as Jefferson’s advice emanates from experiences that view him as a disruption based on his blindness and experiences where he is forced by his blindness to disrupt others’ expectations or thwart their treachery. Even in the final stanza, when Jefferson metaphorizes the guitar into a boxcar, a steak dinner, silk ties and “all the leg you can stroke,” he frustrates the expectation that he would be either asexual or hypersexual as a result of his disability. The philosophy Jefferson offers—“but you gotta wrestle for it, son. you *got* to”—gains clear expression in this particular poem, but it also suffuses the entire collection. Moreover, this philosophy is made possible by virtue of the lived, embodied experience of Jefferson’s black maleness and his blindness, a blind black male musician’s philosophy for life, a black male disabled philosophy.

Indeed, part of the beauty of Jess’s *Leadbelly* (and it is a marvelous collection) is located in its blues quality, repetition with a difference. The text reverberates in multiple ways, not least of which is its indexing of larger social and cultural institutions: the carceral system, the recording industry, the Great Migration, and the Modern Language Association. Terry Rowden, author of *The Songs of Blind Folk: African American Musicians and the Cultures of Blindness*, reminds us that black blind musicians must be accounted for within a “network of interrelated identity concerns that might initially seem to be unrelated political and social issues” (1). In examining the circumstances that helped create the space for black blind musicians, Rowden avers that “it is hard to imagine a more striking symbol of social disenfranchisement than the worn-down and therefore unreadable dots of an overused Braille primer. Such an image does, however, highlight the fact that, then as now, economic privilege has fundamentally determined the extent to which a given disabled individual has been able to acquire the basic skill that could expand his or her range and possibilities” (3). Crippin’ Jim Crow, indeed.¹⁵ Within Jess’s collection, the Jim Crow era gains texture from Jefferson as a referent, a reminder that human variance is no longer considered neutral when impairment is politicized. Although Jess’s Jefferson speaks nothing of his formal education, his presence points to the prevalence of blind black male musicians at the time as not mere coincidence given the confluence of economic and social disenfranchisement, misogyny, and ableism in addition to talent and drive.¹⁶

As I mentioned earlier, this reading uses Jess's poem as the foundational move for asserting a pedagogy for reading blackness and disability. First, finding disability where it appears or disappears in a text does "representational detective work."¹⁷ Yet that appearance of disability may not function to illuminate on its own since some readers think through disability with common, sometimes ableist tropes.¹⁸ The appearance of disability may also escape some readers because "disability" can surface or disappear with language or within cultural structures that require familiarity with both to un/mark them as disability.¹⁹ Second, disability always exists as part of an intersected identity that includes, at minimum, race, gender, sexuality, class, and gender presentation.²⁰ These categories dynamically inform each other,²¹ so analyses of them must attend to how audiences (broadly defined) and the disabled accept, eschew, or manipulate the narratives in flux. Third, blackness and disability, when in tandem, tend not to disappear from narrative view as problems that are solved by the conclusion because, in narratives centering black disabled folk, they or others do not consider them a problem. To be fair, narratives that include blackness and disability—borrowing from Toni Morrison's logic in *Playing in the Dark*—fumble to erase disability and blackness: nonetheless, they still make meaning regardless of the narratives' focus. Black disability and disabled blackness not only craft the major thrust of a narrative such that one cannot explicate or understand the text without them as more than mere detail, but also tend to influence the way we think through poetics, prosody, form, structure. Fourth (but not last, since this is not an exhaustive set of reading strategies), as my endnotes should indicate, this conversation about blackness and disability draws on a host of critical and creative frameworks. The study of disabled blackness and black disability is not new, even though the two fields in question have been slow to incorporate (and I use the bodily pun deliberately) each other.²² Those of us working, and sometimes living at this intersection labor toward one end, among others: to ensure that neither category insists on the other's erasure.²³ The endnotes are an accessible way into this text.²⁴ I invite you to theorize from below.

In crafting this special issue, I sought to raise specific questions about interpretation and theorize about (what might possibly be termed) "black disability studies." The essays curated here certainly perform that function. As is to be expected of any new(ish) field, they also disrupt a neat trajectory of starts and lineages of thinking. The trend for any theory is to reach backward for intellectual forebears and trace a clear line of thought such that the theory emerges as not only useful, but inevitable. Unfortunately, this also tends to make well-ordered trajectories of thought that are and should be inherently messy, or suggest linear progression even though that might be a pleasant fiction. Most scholars would locate a useful, though not definitive beginning with the late Christopher M. Bell's contribution to the second edition of *The Disability Studies Reader*, "Introducing White Disability Studies: A Modest Proposal." In it, he pinpoints the fissures in the field of disability studies, many of which he describes as wedded to white privilege. However, Bell's chapter clarifies that he is neither the first nor the last to note the presence and influence of black disability discourse on the two fields in question. As the scholars in this issue have noted, there are multiple others who opened the space for these modes of reading. For instance, one could trace the concerns of wellness, sociogenic psychosis, and physical difference (among others) through black feminist literature both critical and creative. The current discourse about the aftermath of enslavement and its influence on the present moment attends to the nature of trauma alongside the physiological scars left by encounters with capitalism and the carceral system. If we call out our dead, how many of them in black studies have had the end of their lives shaped by experiences with disability and chronic illness? How many scholars and cultural producers currently live lives shaped by experiences with disability?

Without reading scholars or cultural producers in exclusively biographical terms, their work remains indebted to ideas about ability and disability in such a way that they become participants in this intellectual endeavor. Further, even when blackness and disability are not explicitly within a text, these frameworks still prove revelatory about the text itself. As a result, one never has to justify a black disability reading. Both have consistently been present, intertwined. In truth, these multiple intellectual lineages and the “has already been”-ness creates some degree of scholarly disarray because it eschews the concrete causal relationships between ideas presented as a linear and tidy intellectual history. Yet histories of disability and blackness caution us against the stable narrativizing of ideas and people (hence my use of the present perfect), warning that we elide the important details, nuances, and complexities at our own peril. A field like black disability studies might enjoy being wayward in this regard.

This does not mean that there are no threads that tie these two fields together. Both retain the activist and communal impulses that launched them: black studies as institutionalized in the 1960s and disability studies (in the United States), in the 1990s. Drawing inspiration and energy from protest encourages both fields to explore material realities alongside theoretical possibilities. In practice, scholars attend to the way their ideas might function in the lives of those about whom they speak. For instance, Anna Mollow’s groundbreaking article “‘When Black Women Start Going on Prozac’: Race, Gender, and Mental Illness in Meri Nana-Ama Danquah’s *Willow Weep for Me*” argues persuasively that the binary of impairment/disability cannot be so easily cleaved when at least race and gender are taken into account.²⁵ That is, it becomes impossible to separate impairment as a physical or mental concern from disability as a social and cultural construction. Both, she claims, remain politicized because the cultural understandings of impairment regarding othered bodies determines one’s access to care. Nirmala Erevelles assays how impairment and disability are sutured together when impairment is acquired under politicized conditions. So, the social and cultural terrain creates impairment and turns it into disability. There exists a corollary to the activist and communal impulse to examine material consequence and the knowledge that impairment and disability are not easily parsed: namely, disability takes on a unique narrative texture in communities of color. Here, in this issue, Sami Schalk explains this as a disability metaphor rather than as an ableist one. Schalk theorizes that the disability metaphor allows readers to account for the ways in which the representation is both material and figurative. Disability can operate as a proxy for another social or cultural system while also describing a material condition. In this way, Schalk maintains that disability metaphors “allow us to explore the historical and material connections between disability and other social systems of privilege and oppression.”

As these concerns—material conditions, politicized impairment/disability, language about disability—animate much of the scholarship that binds disability studies and black studies, each disrupts the twin enterprises of ableism and antiblackness. This is not as simple as saying that disability studies has been overwhelmingly white in its orientation (although, historically, it has), nor is it as simple as saying that black studies has been ableist in its orientation (although, historically, it has). While both of those statements are true, they elide the contours and wherefores. Without excusing ableism or antiblackness, these histories reveal a troubling set of circumstances that crafted the definitions of disability and race, writ large. Ellen Samuels, in her monograph *Fantasies of Identification: Disability, Gender, Race*, locates the genesis of this discursive matrix in the nineteenth century. Specifically, these three identities were crafted and regularly policed to ensure that the fictive nature of their stability passed as fact. The truth that they were/are indeed mutable elucidates how each depended on the other for definition as either normal or abnormal. As a result, each group attempted to separate itself from the abnormal

qualities located in the others, particularly for the purpose of securing civil rights, a point to which Douglas C. Baynton accedes.²⁶ Both groups' rejection of each other operates along the same logic. To associate blackness with disability was to endanger the rights granted to the former since the latter carried with them the charge of being unfit for rights. To associate disability with blackness was to endanger the rights granted to the former since the latter carried with them the charge of being unfit for rights. For this reason, the oppression analogies (being disabled is like being black and vice versa) and the ableist metaphors (blackness is a disability or disability automatically equals lack) elide the complexities of both as material experiences, reinscribe the damaging and violent discursive frameworks of abnormality and fungibility, and erase the specificity of the critical terrain. A black disability studies analysis, therefore, allows this tension to rest uneasily at the surface since it shapes the exigencies of our theorizing.

The discursive tension between blackness and disability makes this special issue particularly apropos for the fiftieth anniversary of *African American Review*. In the journal's previous iterations (as *Negro American Literature Forum*, and, later, *Black American Literature Forum*) and in its current version, it consistently foregrounds the import of researching, teaching, and enjoying black literature. Early volumes insist on the rigor of the narrative and poetic texts while demonstrating a particular kind of precision in the critical writing. Like the rest of the academic enterprise, these claims to and for rigor privilege a specific kind of cognitive engagement. That is, as Margaret Price clarifies, "academic discourse operates not just to omit, but to abhor mental disability—to reject it, to stifle and expel it" (8). For Blackademe, this rejection of neurodivergence and cognitive difference attempts to provide a bulwark against the presumption of incompetence,²⁷ subtended as it is by (at least) racist and ableist ideology. Emphasis on literacy (of various kinds) performs a dual function *vis-à-vis* the tension between ability and blackness. On the one hand, it shuts down conversation about those who cannot or refuse to read in accordance with cultural norms. Their difference cannot be subsumed within a body politic wedded to particular kinds of authenticity or cognitive processing. On the other hand, it opens up conversation about the various ways one can read so that those who would not be literate under a white supremacist and/or ableist paradigm might be counted as such, even if their inclusion is uneasy. All of these conversations speak to a concern about the putative fitness of the black professor to think or to belong. Since the black professoriate is a microcosm, this echoes conversations about the putative fitness of the black subject where belonging corresponds to citizenship and the nation-state, or the diaspora. To meld blackness and disability in a journal expressly dedicated to literacy and rigor troubles the commonly drawn corollaries between blackness and disability where either exclusively exists as a marker of lack or abjection.

In addition, the occasion of *African American Review's* fiftieth anniversary invites a consideration of how the discussions in this issue expand upon, echo, and elucidate previous ones within the first issues of the journal. Perusing the early volumes, we find conversations about all of the subjects present within this issue: the import of corrective reading strategies, the distrust of a white medical establishment and its narratives, the bridgeable chasm between popular and critical audiences, the approach to examining metaphor, the conundrum of black women's work in a capitalist enterprise, the exigencies of travel, and the way white privilege finds increasingly clever places to hide. The task of any anniversary issue is to provide a retrospective look such that the current work dialogues with, complicates, and reimagines that which preceded it. In some ways, the collapse of time promulgates disappointment since it may feel as though "you can't win. You can't break even and you can't get out of the game," but it also allows for a sense of blackness and disability that dovetails with the eternal and loving sentiment of Stevie Wonder's

“As.”²⁸ Worrying the temporal line by maneuvering between never and ever (especially since time lengthens when you extract the “for”²⁹) marks the ongoing nature of these conversations as silence has never saved anyone.³⁰

I have divided the special issue into three sections, each designed to foment conversation between the essays in that section. All of the essays speak to each other, but I have grouped them together based on shared intellectual concerns. One way of engaging the essays might be to read the entire issue cover to cover or section by section; another way to engage them would be to read one article from each section to view their dialogue in a different register. The first section examines the embodiment of disability specifically, since questions about interpreting the body—when to look, when to stare, when to ask, what one sees, et cetera—often govern the engagement with disability. Anna Mollow’s “Unvictimized: Toward a Fat Black Disability Studies” considers how we read the confluence of size, race, and disability in this particular political moment. Mollow not only provides a set of strategies for interpreting these identities and embodiments in tandem, but also stresses the urgency of doing so ethically and appropriately when not doing so has lethal consequences. Michael Gill and Nirmala Erevelles’s “The Absent Presence of Elsie Lacks: Hauntings at the Intersection of Race, Class, Gender, and Disability” converses with Mollow’s work by following the life of Elsie Lacks, Henrietta Lacks’s daughter. Their work complicates the discussions about black disabled embodiment by emphasizing the role that others play in narrativizing, controlling, and curtailing the lives of disabled black people. I would also read these two essays alongside Willene Pulliam Taylor’s work in 1976 in *Negro American Literature Forum* on how black radical playwrights have revised the “tainted blood narrative,” since all three essays talk back to the medical industry, whose narratives and influence often delimit black disabled lives regardless of the access it provides.

The second section considers how we read and interpret disability in texts. When scholars locate disability within a text (an analytical feat shaped and/or stymied by cultural context), the concern regarding analysis arises when we seek to write about disability and blackness in tandem. Sami Schalk explains that disability metaphors differentiate themselves from ableist and overcoming metaphors because they are sometimes both the product of oppression and a metaphor for it. In “Interpreting Disability Metaphor and Race in Octavia E. Butler’s ‘The Evening and the Morning and the Night,’” Schalk argues persuasively for examining the kind of work that disability metaphors do in racialized contexts, emphasizing disability as a multifaceted embodied experience. Timothy S. Lyle’s provocatively and aptly titled “Tryin’ to Scrub That ‘Death Pussy’ Clean Again: The Pleasures of Domesticating HIV/AIDS in Pearl Cleage’s Fiction” challenges the extent to which we can push on disability metaphors. Lyle conjectures that the pleasure of reading Pearl Cleage’s fiction rests on unexamined ableism, questioning the tipping point when metaphors about disability become ableist metaphors. What work does a crisis of imagination perform? The last essay in the section, Sarah Orem’s “(Un)Necessary Procedures: Black Women, Disability, and Work in *Grey’s Anatomy*,” explores the flexibility of these interpretive possibilities when they become televisual. Orem traces the conundrum posed by embodying and interpreting disability, womanhood, and blackness at the same time: she teases out the confluence of misogynoir and ableism when they pretend to normalcy. These essays complicate those in the first section by blurring the distinction between that which appears to emanate from the body and that which is mapped onto the body. Tracing this idea in the annals of *African American Review*, Edward E. Waldron’s article on William Attaway’s *Blood on the Forge* (1976) concerns itself with the shifts in character prompted by shifts in ability status. His article alongside these three foregrounds the way disability transforms a text whether or not it is the central narrative focus.

The final section ponders blackness, disability, and their movement in the world. It is a hallmark of disability experience that one is sequestered away (often in

institutions and private homes). This is of course a different kind of segregation from Jim Crow, but the two have an odd similarity in that they attempt to publicly erase instantiations of disability and blackness so that those who fear, dislike, or misunderstand them do not have to come into contact with them. Dennis Tyler, Jr. examines an intersection of Jim Crow and disability in “Jim Crow’s Disabilities: Racial Injury, Immobility, and the ‘Terrible Handicap’ in the Literature of James Weldon Johnson.” Tyler’s essay investigates how Johnson navigates disability as a slippery language and experience that serves as an imperfect analogy for blackness. I would suggest reading Tyler’s work, which traverses Johnson’s autobiographical and fictive texts, as a pedagogy for how to read what happens when disability moves across an oeuvre. The differences between Johnson’s narratives evince a useful tension between disability and blackness as metaphors and disability and blackness as experiences. We have seen quite a few essays on James Weldon Johnson over the life of the *African American Review*, but one of the early essays by Robert Fleming (1970) captures how the concerns of Johnson’s fictive text raises ontological questions that reverberate in the present moment. Jeffrey A. Brune’s essay “Blind Like Me: John Howard Griffin, Disability, Intersectionality, and Civil Rights in Postwar America” examines Griffin’s seminal and rightly critiqued *Black Like Me* and Griffin’s archival material for how the influence of disability pervades the text. Brune’s historical approach complements the other work in this section because of its attention to how the imperfect analogies between disability and race make meaning when Griffin’s white, disabled body moves through the world. The last essay in this issue, Leon J. Hilton’s “‘Avonte’s Law’: Disability Surveillance, Racial Schematization, Autistic Wandering,” explores the rhetorical and material dangers that emerge when neuro-atypical black people attempt to navigate the world. Hilton’s analysis of Avonte Oquendo’s disappearance and death stresses a re-examination of contemporary policing policies for black autistic people. Read Hilton’s essay alongside Mollow’s since both understand the Black Lives Matter movement not solely as a series of events or circumstances, but as Alicia Garza, Opal Tometti, and Patrisse Cullors’s theoretical intervention.³¹ Within the first issue of *Negro American Literature Forum*, the sociogenic understandings of psychosis emerge in John F. Bayliss’s “*Native Son*: Protest or Psychological Study?” Bayliss states that “*Native Son* is preoccupied with a delinquent mind” (6), wrestling with the implications of viewing Bigger as either complete anomaly or a product of his environment. When read alongside Hilton and Tyler’s essays, we question the slippage between discourses of disability and blackness during the era of Jim Crow as a way to explain or disrupt the “doxic seduction of whiteness, maleness, and ablebodiedness masquerading as normalcy” (Pickens 9).

This project, because it is committed to blackness and disability as ontologies wedded to a communal ethos, owes a debt to the members of my scholarly and personal community who helped make this special issue a reality. I am immensely indebted to Terry Rowden, Herman Beavers, and Sue Houchins for their encouragement throughout this project. It takes a gentle push, or a hard shove. I’m glad you gave me both. Nathan Grant: thank you for your unwavering enthusiasm while trusting me to cast a vision and shepherd this to completion. I have no words for the incomparable Aileen Keenan, whose clarity and adroit editorial eye ensures that these essays shine. I am deeply appreciative to all of the readers for their hard work. Often, when one does not like the topic of a writer’s work, one disparages the writing. Those trains are never late. Thank you for not riding them. Thank you even more for believing in these authors and providing thorough, critical, generous commentary that helped make this work more robust. The field owes you. I end with a final note of thanks to those black, disabled folks who know in their flesh what Blind Lemon Jefferson articulates through Tyehimba Jess’s imagination: “you gotta wrestle for it.” You got to. . . .

Notes

1. I point to/signify on the blue color often used by handicap access signs, the phrase “blue black” which connotes dark complexion, the blues (e.g., “What did I do to get so black and blue?”), blue as a way to describe depression, and black & blue as a description of the aftermath of a fight or a bruise. I invoke these as a way to embrace and celebrate the excess often attributed to both blackness and disability as well as itinerant experiences of joy, pain, depression, excitement, insult, and intimacy, among others. I also use the phrase “making sense” to index the sensory and sensual experiences often referenced in ableist phrases as well as the act of interpretation.

2. Certainly, this description is a summary. I have called it a description because of the way scholars seeking to create access for visually impaired people describe images rather than assume sightedness as part of the audience’s engagement. Here, I toy with the sensory differences between “describe” and “summarize” to call attention to our assumptions about audience.

3. As I have said elsewhere, art that takes disability as its central concern usually leaves itself unmoored by insisting on the diffuse and, at times, ineffable quality of reality. Criticism that examines disability tends to dwell in the same kind of space in that it often calls attention to the various possibilities within critique that do not involve linear argumentation. See Therí A. Pickens, “Octavia Butler and the Aesthetics of the Novel,” in *Feminist Disability Studies*, Kim Q. Hall, ed., spec. issue of *Hypatia* 30.1 (2015): 167-80.

4. As with most fields that have activist impulses and beginnings—black studies and disability studies among them—the critical work also contains a pedagogical impulse. Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy* sums this up thusly: “One question is who is responsible? Another is can you read?” (3). Black studies and disability studies (both separately and apart) seek a consistent pedagogical aim, to teach people to re-read race and disability. Special thanks to Timothy S. Lyle for bringing this passage to my attention.

5. To be clear, this is really just a starting point. Disability helps to co-create a text even when it is not explicitly mentioned by name or when it is mentioned in an ableist context. For more information on this concept *vis-à-vis* intellectual disability, see Michael Bérubé, *The Secret Life of Stories: From Don Quixote to Harry Potter, How Understanding Intellectual Disability Transforms the Way We Read* (New York: New York UP, 2016). To understand this concept with regard to physical disability, see David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2001). Tobin Siebers also writes about this concept with regard to disability and art in *Disability Aesthetics* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2010).

6. Quite a few disability studies texts make a distinction between impairment, the physiological or mental concern, and disability, the social and cultural (among other) structures and institutions that make that impairment a problem. For a primer, see Simi Linton, *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity* (New York: New York UP, 1998). For a written performance piece, see Therí A. Pickens, “What Drives Work: A Written Performance Piece,” *Polymath* 4.1 (2014). Within scholarship on blackness and disability, others have pointed out that impairment and disability cannot be collapsed quite so easily. See Mollow; and all of Nirmala Erelles’s work, especially “Becoming Disabled/Becoming Black: Crippin’ Critical Ethnic Studies from the Periphery,” in *Critical Ethnic Studies: A Reader*, Critical Ethnic Studies Editorial Collective, ed. (Durham: Duke UP, 2016), 231-51; “The Color of Violence: Reflecting on Gender, Race, and Disability in Wartime,” in *Feminist Disability Studies*, Kim Q. Hall, ed. (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2011), 117-35; and *Disability and Difference in Global Contexts: Enabling a Transformative Body Politic* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). Scholars situated in black studies also address the extent to which notions of impairment, health, wellness, cure, and the like are based on blackness (its erasure and its presence). For instance, Alicia D. Bonaparte points out that granny midwives’ knowledge was unceremoniously discarded as a legitimate epistemology to make room for white male physician authority. C. Riley Snorton explicitly links the emergence of obstetrics discourse not only with blackness, but also with Trans* identity because of its relationship to determining/making indeterminate black gender. Snorton’s link between the medical industry, experimentation on black women, enslavement, and Trans* identity pinpoints disability discourse as a significant thread of this conversation. See Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2017); and Bonaparte, “Male Claims of Authoritative Knowledge: Physicians’ Discourse for Regulations of Granny Midwives in South Carolina,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 26.4 (2014): 1-29.

7. Rowden addresses the exigencies of blind black musicians’ survival (1-13).

8. Thank you to Kameelah Martin for her insight about the distinction between disfigurement and dismemberment. Her comment has stayed with me, urging me toward more critical thinking. I am glad her influence has found its way into my printed work.

9. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s edited collection *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (New York: New York UP, 1996) contains a wide variety of essays that address how audiences react to and collude with performers of disability. Keep in mind that this is not limited to circuses, carnivals, freak shows, and the like. As Garland-Thomson’s collection points out, audiences are composed of a wide variety of people and are constituted by a wide variety of circumstances. As our colleagues in performance

studies would insist, performance is not limited to the stage. For a discussion of disability and the circus specifically, see Rachel Adams, "Disability and the Circus," in *The History of the Circus in America*, Kenneth Ames, ed. (New Haven: Yale UP, 2012), 2-20.

10. Simi Linton and others pinpoint the difficulty with the idea of the overcoming narrative. See Linton, *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity* (New York: New York UP, 1998). For an overview of how blacks have mobilized disability as part of an overcoming narrative, see Joshua Lukin, "Disability and Blackness," in *The Disability Studies Reader*, 4th ed., Lennard Davis, ed. (New York: Routledge, 2013), 308-15.

11. These three sentences are a nod to the idea that, in these texts, disability is not used as a narrative prosthesis. David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder describe this phenomenon in *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2001). I would add that Moya Bailey argues about the ways that blackness and disability can shift the ableist narratives at the core of racist thought and some intragroup narratives. See Bailey, "'The Illest': Disability as Metaphor in Hip Hop Music," in *Blackness and Disability: Critical Examinations and Cultural Interventions*, Christopher M. Bell, ed. (East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 2011), 141-48. Clare Barker also points out where the idea of narrative prosthesis falls apart in postcolonial texts. See Barker, "Interdisciplinary Dialogues: Disability and Postcolonial Studies," *Review of Disability Studies* 6.3 (2010): 15-24.

12. Valerie L. Popp, Darryl A. Smith, Ato Quayson, Theri A. Pickens, and others write about the extent to which disability shifts the conversation about structure. When a critical or a creative work insists on disability within its structure, it changes the conversations about its form. That is to say, disability is not merely the topic; it suffuses the text. In many ways, this echoes Barbara Christian's idea that texts by a group of people about that same group change the form and the content, particularly when that form was not meant for them to read or understand. See Christian, "The Race for Theory," in *African American Literary Theory*, Winston Napier, ed. (New York: New York UP, 2000), 280-89; Theri A. Pickens, "Octavia Butler and the Aesthetics of the Novel," in *Feminist Disability Studies*, Kim Q. Hall, ed., spec. issue of *Hyppatia* 30.1 (2015): 167-80; Popp, "'Eloquent Limbs': D.H. Lawrence and the Aesthetics of Disability," *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* 5.1 (2011): 35-52; Quayson, *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation* (New York: Columbia UP, 2007); Smith, "Handi-/Cappin' Slaves and Laughter by the Dozens: Divine Dismemberment and Disability Humor in the US," *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* 7.3 (2013): 289-304.

13. I am particularly grateful to Steven C. Tracy's delineation of the blues novel and Herman Beavers's blues poetry for inspiring this reading. See Tracy, "The Blues Novel," in *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*, Maryemma Graham, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004), 122-38.

14. Disability studies scholars tend to create access by describing images or text during their presentations. That impulse guided me to think through the way the poem appears on the page. It is important to consider how the visual nature of written text influences its reading, a point emphasized during Evie Shockley's address to scholars in July 2012 at an NEH-sponsored summer seminar on contemporary black literature. Disability is also invoked by the act of reading, a point emphasized in Lennard Davis's description of the deaf moment that occurs when we consume written text. See Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness and the Body* (New York: Verso, 1995).

15. I borrow this phrase from one of Nirmala Erevelles's articles about Jim Crow, the carceral system, and disability. See Erevelles, "Crippin' Jim Crow: Disability, Dis-Location, and the School-to-Prison Pipeline," in *Disability Incarcerated: Imprisonment and Disability in the United States and Canada*, Liat Ben-Moshe, Chris Chapman, and Allison C. Carey, eds. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 81-100. "Crippling" is a common disability studies methodology developed by Robert McRuer in his monograph *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: New York UP, 2006), where he invokes the opprobrium used to describe the disabled and its confluence with the gang (Crips) to pinpoint how disability makes vexed meaning. Erevelles mobilizes this methodology to explain the exigencies of the carceral system for disabled black folk and its long histories. I find it useful to read not only Erevelles's essay on this topic, but also the others within the collection *Disability Incarcerated*, since this collection reflects exceptional scholarship. The introduction by Liat Ben-Moshe, Chris Chapman, and Allison C. Carey is especially well done.

16. It would be extremely difficult to name all the factors that contributed to the cadre of black blind (male) musicians. I take care to insert talent and drive because that occupies a vexed position in the conversations since it is often delimited by the power hierarchies that determine whether one succeeds. Success, too, is also a vexed proposition. I recommend a thorough look at Jess's *Leadbelly* for all it offers in terms of the complicated relationship between black artists and white audiences.

17. Black studies and disability studies in combination are descriptive, corrective, and prescriptive. One of the descriptive impulses, as Bell describes it, is to find black disabled forebears and highlight their contributions to discourse without erasing their race, or disability.

18. It does not go without saying that if one reads from an ableist perspective, one will create an ableist critique. The same is true for racist perspectives and critiques. So, we have to read disability and blackness with an attention to the humanity of those who embody those differences and honor those differences in our work. I would go so far as to say that any reading that denies the complexity of humanity lacks rigor, for it refuses to support the nuance that automatically comes from a possessive investment in whiteness, ableism, and other -isms or -phobias. See George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics*, (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2006).

19. I refer to the fact that disability is not necessarily understood as a problem within certain communities. See Siobhan Senier, “‘Traditionally, Disability Was Not Seen as Such’: Writing and Healing in the Work of Mohegan Medicine People,” in *Disability and Indigeneity*, Siobhan Senier and Clare Barker, eds., spec. issue of *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* 7.2 (2013): 213-29; and Kim E. Nielsen, *A Disability History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon, 2012).

20. Although others worked with the idea well before her, Kimberlé Crenshaw’s articulation of intersectionality, particularly her dynamic example of the intersection, continues to be informative. See Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 6 (1991): 1241-99. In *Skin Trade* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1996), Ann duCille also points out that intersections are dangerous places.

21. Michelle Jarman’s work takes care to scrutinize how these discourses function in tandem. See Jarman, “Dismembering the Lynch Mob: Intersecting Narratives of Disability, Race, and Sexual Menace,” in *Sex and Disability*, Robert McRuer and Anna Mollow, eds. (Durham: Duke UP, 2012), 89-107. Samuels details how these narratives were co-created during the nineteenth century.

22. Bell’s chapter in Davis’s collection, “Introducing White Disability Studies: A Modest Proposal,” is widely considered the premier text of black disability studies, but it is important to acknowledge, as he does, that some of the work of Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, David Yuan, and others preceded his. See Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia UP, 1997), especially chapter 4; and “The Celebrity Freak: Michael Jackson’s Grotesque Glory,” in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, ed. (New York: New York UP, 1996), 368-84. It is also important to note that others have been working at the intersection of race and disability; Cynthia Wu and Jennifer James co-edited a special issue of *MELUS* on this topic. See Wu and James, “Race, Ethnicity, Disability, and Literature: Intersections and Interventions,” in *Disability and Ethnicity*, Cynthia Wu and Jennifer C. James, eds., spec. issue of *MELUS* 31.3 (2006): 3-13. Hannah Joyner, Susan Burch, Michael Rembis, Baynton, Dea H. Boster, and Paul R. D. Lawrie have taken this intersection up within the discipline of history. See Burch and Joyner, *Unspeakable: the Story of Junius Wilson* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2007); Burch and Rembis; Baynton; Boster, *African American Slavery and Disability* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Boster, “‘Unfit for Ordinary Purposes’: Disability, Slaves, and Decision Making In the Antebellum American South,” in Burch and Rembis 201-17; and Lawrie, “‘Salvaging the Negro’: Race, Rehabilitation, and the Body Politic in World War I America, 1917-1924,” in Burch and Rembis 321-44. Jeffrey A. Brune and Daniel J. Wilson edited a volume on disability and passing, *Disability and Passing: Blurring the Lines of Identity* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2013), which is useful for considering the work of performance, race, and disability. Since race includes categories other than black and white, it is also important to acknowledge the work of those such as Julie Avril Minich, author of the award-winning *Accessible Citizenships: Disability, Nation, and the Cultural Politics of Greater Mexico* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2013); Cynthia Wu, author of *Chang and Eng Reconnected: The Original Siamese Twins in American Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2012); Eunjung Kim, author of *Curative Violence: Rehabilitating Disability, Gender, and Sexuality in Modern Korea*, (Durham: Duke UP, 2017); and Alison Kafer, author of *Feminist. Queer. Crip.* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2013). A sampling of other book chapters and articles makes clear that this critical and creative work is robust.

23. Timothy S. Lyle carefully delineates how this erasure is dangerous in his article “‘Prolonging Last Call’: Jamaica Kincaid’s Voyeuristic Pleasures in *My Brother*,” *Journal of West Indian Literature* 22.1 (2013): 33-62.

24. I take this cue from Susan Burch and Michael Rembis, who for access reasons clarify some of the inroads to their edited collection, *Disability Histories*.

25. This is the major binary of disability studies in the United States. This idea—impairment as separate from disability—has critical purchase in part because it creates a logical space for a social model where disability is not understood as divine punishment or moral failing (moral model) or a problem in need of fixing (medical model). Recently, scholars have been thinking through alternatives such as Tobin Siebers’s theory of complex embodiment, but this binary still holds persuasive sway. See Siebers, *Disability Theory* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2008).

26. See Baynton.

27. Here, I signify on the valuable and needed collection entitled *Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia* (Boulder: Utah State UP, 2012), edited by Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs, Yolanda Flores Niemann, Carman G. González, and Angela P. Harris, which explores how the racist and sexist discourse about professors who are women of color surfaces in the academic institution. The collection deeply engages issues of citizenship status and queerness as well. Despite its emphasis on health and well-being and the way discourses of ability subtend the discussion, it does not make disability an explicit category of analysis in any of the essays (as made clear by the lack of a “disability” entry in the index).

28. I signify on Michael Jackson and Stevie Wonder because of their relationships to discourses and embodiment of both disability and blackness. Their music, because it also has traversed several generations, allows for and courts a collapse and/or eliding of temporal boundaries in a way that emphasizes the interconnectedness of these identities and the communal nature of how one can experience them. I also point to them as central figures within this critical terrain because they are so often marshaled in colloquial discourse as part of ableist rhetoric (i.e., “I’m Stevie Wonder to it” usually means that one refuses to engage a topic; to be “like Michael Jackson” tends to mean being *de facto* insane). See Jackson, “You Can’t Win,” in *The Wiz* (MCA, 1978); and Wonder.

29. I signify on Bernie Mac, since he is another person who embodied blackness and disability.

30. I reference Audre Lorde, as her understanding of this concept was heavily influenced by her experiences with her embodiment in terms of size, chronic illness, and visual impairment. The purpose in pointing to these figures is, in part, to perform the “representational detective work” to which Bell alludes, but also to foreground the spaces where black notions of disability and disabled notions of blackness appear. See Lorde, *The Cancer Journals* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1997); and Lorde, “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Actions,” in *Sister/Outsider* (Berkeley: Ten Speed, 2007), 40-45.

31. Alicia Garza, Opal Tometti, and Patrisse Cullors began the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter as a call to action after Trayvon Martin was blamed as the aggressor in his own death and George Zimmerman was determined to be not guilty for Martin’s death. See Garza, “A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement,” *The Feminist Wire*, 7 Oct. 2014, web.

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