Performing Brawn and Sass: Strength and Disability in Black Women's Writing

Dissertation

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Abstract

My dissertation, *Performing Brawn and Sass: Strength and Disability in Black Women's Writing*, examines contemporary African American narratives to gauge how writers re-imagine, complicate, or even reject the trope of the Strong Black Woman. I define the "Strong Black Woman" as a standard that black women are assumed to inherently demonstrate. As opposed to the demureness of conventional femininity, the Strong Black Woman is portrayed as bold and outspoken. In addition to being physically strong and able to labor, she possesses the emotional and mental resolve that allows her to hold her family and her community together during hardship. The cultural endurance of the figure is a major problem I cite in my dissertation. Because the Strong Black Woman is such a cultural mainstay in African American literature and mainstream media, she has become a source of racial pride exclusively synonymous with black womanhood. However, I identify the Strong Black Woman as an ableist ideal that oversimplifies black female narrative voice and erases bodily variety.

I argue that by rejecting the Strong Black Woman's ableism and investment in self-sacrifice while adapting her dedication to survival and independence, black women writers present black female characters less familiar than the Strong Black Woman, but more complex and human. I take a two-pronged approach to my methodology, placing scholarship from black feminist theory and disability studies in conversation with one another. Black feminist theory's investigation of race and gender, and the dynamics between black women and systems of power greatly informs my character analysis. Furthermore, disability studies critics have shown how normativity isn't an objective, universal measure, but is instead an extension of hegemony, marking and policing all bodies that exist outside of the white ideal. My dissertation uses this

conceptual framework to explore how the representation of black women's bodyminds and behavior as inherently deviant is naturalized by notions of normativity. I examine Sapphire's *Push* (1996), Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973), Audre Lorde's *Cancer Journals* (1980), Meri Nana-Ama Danquah's *Willow Weep for Me: A Black Woman's Journey Through Depression* (1998), Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993), and Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* (2010) to highlight how black women writers are constructing nuanced portraits of strength across genres, from memoirs to speculative fiction.

Dedication

Dedicated to my mother and late father.

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Introduction

Whether we consider the stoic matriarch or the glamorous, yet brazen diva, what these archetypes all have in common is an inspiring sense of mental and physical fortitude that is unrelenting. For generations, it's been assumed that black women have an immeasurable reservoir of strength to get through the most trying times. Strength is so synonymous with black womanhood that the phrase "Strong Black Woman"[1] has become both an archetype and a colloquial shorthand that connotes racial pride and feminist independence. Throughout this dissertation, *Performing Brawn and Sass: Strength and Disability in Black Women's Writing,* I define the "Strong Black Woman" as a standard that black women are assumed to have inherent access to. As opposed to the demureness of conventional femininity, the Strong Black Woman is bold and outspoken. In addition to being physically strong and able to labor, she possesses the emotional and mental resolve that allows her to hold her family and her community together during hardship. On the one hand, critics have championed this figure as one of the few positive portrayals of black womanhood that undermines narratives of black inferiority. On the other hand, this mythic black strength has been used to police presumably misbehaving black women. Physical and mental strength can be an admirable characteristic attributed to black women, but when it's perceived to exist in excess, it quickly becomes a way of racializing black women as Others.

[1] For the sake of clarity, throughout this dissertation, I capitalize Strong Black Woman to distinguish between strength as a character quality that anyone can possess, and is not necessarily problematic or toxic, and the performative role of the Strong Black Woman that is culturally specific to black culture.

One merely has to take a quick glance at current events to see how common black women's bodies are demonized as overly strong. The uproar Serena Williams received at the 2018 US Open is a recent example. At a pivotal game, Williams vocalized clear frustration with the calls the umpire was making, and commentators[2] not only condemned her behavior as unsportsmanlike but *The Herald Sun* turned the incident into a caricature.

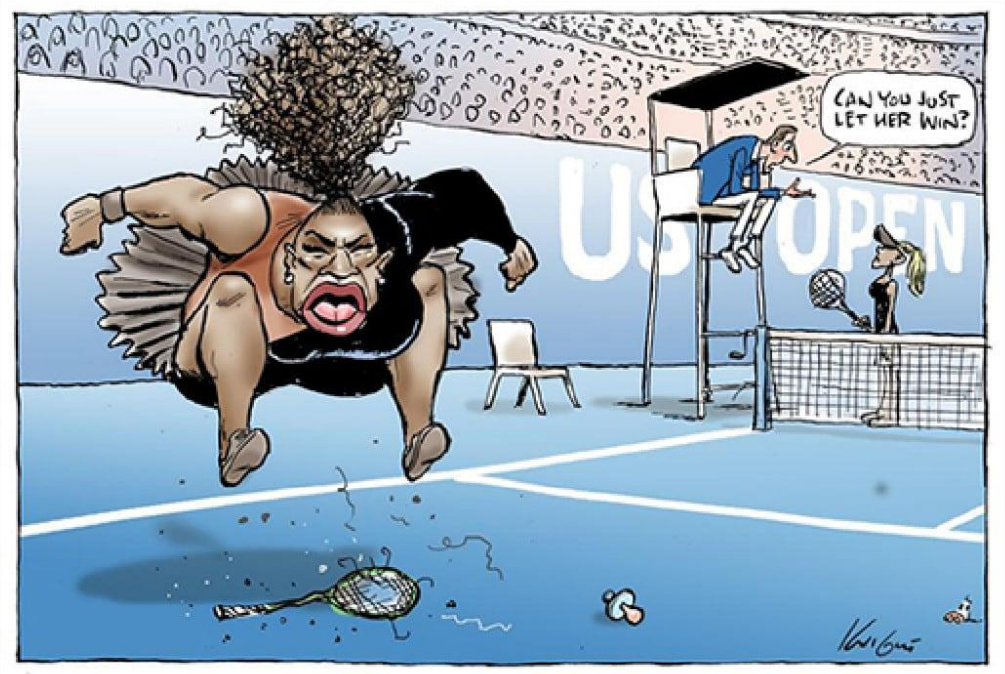

Figure 1. Marc Knight, "U.S. Open." 2018.

[2] For further discussion of Williams' behavior at the 2018 U.S. Open, see Pontefract (n.p.)

Marc Knight illustrated Williams as an enraged, animal-like caricature, with exaggerated facial features, reminiscent of minstrel characters. Williams was noticeably more visually intimidating in contrast to her opponent, Naomi Osaka, who was illustrated as a befuddled petite, white woman, despite her black and Japanese heritage. Drawing Williams's strong, athletic bodymind[3] as monstrous demonstrates how the ideal of black female strength is a double-edged sword that so quickly dehumanizes black women perceived as defiant. The frequency of incidents like the US Open where black women are mocked as un-feminine, and consequently monstrous, suggests a linkage between the cultural perception of black female strength and anti-black narratives.

The Strong Black Woman has been such an appealing strategy for countering anti-black rhetoric because this figure demonstrates unparalleled physical resiliency. In a society that privileges exceptional physicality, whether it is beauty, athleticism or sheer endurance, strength is of inherent value. Black physicality has been used to demonstrate parity between black and white subjects. However, I contend that a quality that can so easily be appropriated for ridicule, like what we see with the vitriol leveled against Williams, is an impossibly flawed solution to anti-blackness. Furthermore, the presumption of black physical ability that tropes like the Strong Black Woman suggest are inherently ableist in their denial of disability. The Strong Black Woman is such a stagnant character in her unyielding stamina and intensity that she leaves no

[3] I use the term "bodymind" throughout my dissertation. My understanding of the term comes from Margaret Price's "The Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain." According to Price, the term bodymind acknowledges that "mental and physical processes not only affect each other but also give rise to each other—that is, because they tend to act as one, even though they are conventionally understood" (269). Thus, I explicitly use the term bodymind to similarly express that the physical body and the mind can't be separated out.

room for other kinds of black womanhood. And therein lies one of the biggest problems with this archetype.

Throughout this dissertation I use disability studies as a lens to challenge the Strong Black Woman. The Strong Black Woman is a supra-human with absolute physical and mental abilities. Disability Studies takes a measured approach in examining absolute truths about the human bodymind, assumed to be natural and inevitable. Thus, the discourse around the Strong Black Woman could benefit from a disability studies-focused analysis of ableism, essentialism, and the socially constructed distinctions between the disabled and the able-bodied. I've found that these themes are all bloodlines of the Strong Black Woman that authors, critics, and readers often take for granted as unavoidable when discussing black female embodiment in black literature. My goals with this dissertation are to divorce the Strong Black Woman of the romanticizing that protects her from reproach. People still invest in the Strong Black Woman as proof of black exceptionalism. But I want to show that this figure helps promote the essentialism and ableism that overdetermines black women. Ultimately, the Strong Black Woman is an impossible standard to live up to, and there are more ways of existing as a black woman than what this limiting trope offers. I use this dissertation as a call to scholars, critics, and readers to change their approach in how they address racist narratives. It is folly for scholars and readers to invest political faith in figures like the Strong Black Woman that, at best, tout excess ability, and at worst, reinforce the myth of white supremacy as a yardstick that measures everyone else's worth.

I titled my dissertation "Performing Brawn and Sass" because I have found that the Strong Black Woman is a performative caricature that shuts out the sick, mentally ill, amputated, queer black bodyminds that make up the collective. In my analysis I want to demonstrate the

complicated and often contradictory relationship critics, black female authors, and the characters all have with the Strong Black Woman. Some authors openly despise this figure, while others have a love-hate relationship, citing the trope's assets and weaknesses. But I've found that regardless of the author's positive or negative stance on the Strong Black Woman, black women authors tend to table the problematic qualities of the archetype and extend the positive characteristics into qualities that more accurately speak to black women's experiences. Through my analysis, I want to introduce alternatives to the Strong Black Woman that, rooted in disability and vulnerability, are consequently more human.

In addition to disability studies, I incorporate black feminist theory into my methodology. A black feminist perspective pays extensive attention to the ways that the male gaze and misogynoir together victimize black women. More importantly, critics theorize the strategies black female creators engage to find ways out of the victimization that has been a dominant theme in black American women's experiences. The dialogue black feminists continue to develop around victimization and agency is a helpful lens in considering how black female authors take a trope that was thrust upon black women's bodyminds, and re-shape this figure to tell their own stories. Furthermore, black feminist theorists like Kimberlé Crenshaw [4] have successfully drawn critical attention to the social structure, in showing how class, race, and gender discrimination work together. Intersectionality is essentially at the basis of all my character analysis in this dissertation. However, a consideration of the way that bodily variety creates barriers to access can only enhance the work black feminist scholars have already accomplished in better understanding the politics of inequality.

[4] For further discussion of intersectionality from a black feminist lens, see Crenshaw 1241-1242.

While black feminist theory has always endorsed an intersectional approach, disability studies has historically been white dominated as far as the scholars and subject matter. Lennard J. Davis, one of the pioneers of the field, recently went as far as arguing that since disability is such an unstable category, it should be tabled along with all other identity markers. Notions like this may work for the most privileged in society, like white cisgender men, but they completely ignore social groups that rely on their minority status to build coalitions. Few disability studies works focus on bodies that are marginalized in ways beyond just disability, and how the intersection of multiple forms of oppression creates varied experiences that need to be discussed.

Recent disability studies scholarship, like that of Nirmala Erevelles and Therí Pickens, has begun the crucial work of putting race, class, and many other social markers of identity into dialogue with one another. With my examination of the Strong Black Woman, I hope to contribute to this discourse by showing how this figure reinforces the myth of black immunity to disability and denies the inevitable vulnerabilities of the human condition. My dissertation places these two fields in conversation because black feminist theory could benefit from disability studies' dedication to interrogating normalcy. Normativity is the lifeline of racism and sexism, as it dictates which bodies get otherized, and which bodies enjoy privilege. Thus, the inclusion of disability studies into black feminist work like my project can only enrich knowledge of the interlocking systems that work against black women. More importantly, disability studies could benefit from the strategies African American literary scholars take in thinking about how different aspects of identity, beyond disability, work together to oppress. And the way black authors and critics interrogate the anonymity of whiteness could be adapted in disability studies where whiteness is often the default identity. Ultimately, my work aims to offer a timely contribution to the still emerging area of black disability studies by examining the intersection of

race, gender and disability in literary characterization of black womanhood. Putting together disability studies and black feminist analysis will allow for a thorough exploration of the Strong Black Woman by troubling the ableism of this figure as well as the toxic standards that she sets for black women.

Although the trajectory and the objectives have changed throughout the years, black feminist theorists have consistently identified the Strong Black Woman as a stereotype that doesn't speak to black women's complicated interiority and lived experiences, and instead functions to maintain the racial status quo. Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment (*1990), a groundbreaking work in black feminist theory, identifies tropes like the Strong Black Woman as controlling images, or stereotypes that naturalize presumed differences between black women and other groups, and justify the subjugation of black women. She advises black women readers to push against controlling images by creating their own art and images and refraining from internalizing stereotypes as a part of their identity and worldview (Hill Collins 27). Hill Collins work rightly shows that the reach of stereotypes goes far beyond harmless entertainment, and they play a pivotal part in the dehumanization of black women and the justification of their second-class citizenship status.

As admirable as Hill Collins work is, she runs the risk of reinforcing the tropes she identifies as controlling images. At times her vision for black feminist theory is rather lofty and reiterates the independence, bold confidence, and self-healing agency of the Strong Black Woman. Hill Collins' emphasis on self-definition unintentionally allows the figure to re-surface, noting that "whether individual struggles to develop a changed consciousness or the group persistence needed to transform social institutions, actions that bring about changes empower

African-American women… so many African-American women have managed to persist and 'make a way out of no way.' Perhaps they knew the power of self-definition" (121). The tableau Hill Collins paints of what black feminist sisterhood can be at its best illustrates both the good and the toxicity of the Strong Black Woman. Like the trope, the black women Hill Collins idealizes are defined by hardship that they can overcome if they harness personal willpower, tenacity, and resourcefulness in order to produce life-altering change that benefits the marginalized collective. In her effort to strategize liberation, Hill Collins plays into the naturalized role and burden for black women to be superwomen and use sheer grit to make change happen for themselves. Ultimately, the most egregious aspect of the Strong Black Woman that Hill Collins reiterates is the onus the figure places on black women's shoulders to resolve their own oppression rather than rightfully holding society accountable. Other early, noteworthy black feminist works like Michele Wallace's *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1999), and Trudier Harris's *Saints, Sinners, and Saviors: Strong Black Women in African American Literature* (2001) similarly tend to reinforce the Strong Black Woman as they attempt to deconstruct or challenge the figure, or even rely on ableism and gender roles to validate their criticism of the figure.

As opposed to observing the Strong Black Woman at a distance, as scholars like Hill Collins have done, other black feminist critics have taken a more personal approach, and decried the figure for the way it has made them question their most intimate feelings. A thread we can trace throughout these personal narratives is the juxtaposition of emotional openness with immediate pressure from outsiders to censure these feelings and carry on with an unrelenting performance of confidence and strength. In Joan Morgan's *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost* (1999), she laments that "like most SBWs [Strong Black Women], I'd developed a real

fear of vulnerability or imperfection. The few times, it seemed like I could barely get the words out before somebody reminded me I was a STRONGBLACKWOMAN. So I listened to the SBW in me and retreated in angry silence" (90). When ableism and misogynoir collide and dictate that black women must be everything to everyone at all times, vulnerability becomes an intolerable sign of weakness. When Morgan wants to tap into vulnerable feelings, outsiders encourage her to assume the relentless outlook of the "SBW" and silence those ruminations. As I will discuss in Chapter Two, with many personal narratives, there is a sense of urgency from either outsiders or the author herself to quickly pivot away from any conversation about vulnerability. Consequently, readers get a critique of the Strong Black Woman, but no consideration of how to replace this figure in the emotional lexicon of black women's writing.

More recent black feminist scholarship has identified the Strong Black Woman as a part of a larger culture of toxic black femininity, thus highlighting the psychological harm that undergirds this trope. Lorin C. Kelly et al identify toxic black femininity as a normalized tendency to be the "hypersexual, and primary caregiver to all, before acknowledging or taking care of one's own needs and desires" (55). Other critics are starting to analyze the figure from a disability studies lens. Scholars like Anna Hinton rightly identify that part of the problem with the Strong Black Woman isn't just her perpetuation of gendered and racial status quo as black feminist theorists have argued, nor is it just the selflessness that toxic black femininity points out, but it's also the ableist standards she sets forth. Efforts to unite race and disability have led critics to consider parallels between the Strong Black Woman and character tropes within disability studies. By looking at non-normative black female characters in a range of texts from speculative fiction to biographical memoirs, I critique the limitations of the Strong Black Woman. More importantly, I arrive at nuanced representations of black female fortitude that juxtapose fortitude

with themes that black feminists have struggled with or even overlooked in the past, notably disability and fragility.

II.

Since Black Americans are overrepresented in the U.S. population of people with disabilities, it is especially striking that neither public attention nor scholarly disability studies focuses adequately on black disability. According to recent U.S. Census data, black Americans only make up 13.4% of the national population, yet 14.1% of Americans with disabilities, which is down in comparison to previous years, but blacks are still largely overrepresented amongst the disabled (U.S. Census Bureau; Bialik). Reasons for this overrepresentation are many and varied including poverty, and consequential differences in access to quality healthcare and health insurance, labor-induced disability, misdiagnosis, and medical malpractice, just to name a few. The cross-pollination between race, class, and disability that many African Americans find themselves in the middle of is rife with potential to drive the conversation in disability studies forward into new areas. Yet, when we consider the historic development of disability studies, black disability has been largely absent from the conversation.

In comparison to older established disciplines within academia, disability studies is relatively new. Disability studies was formally established in the U.S with the first publication of the *Disability Studies Quarterly* in 1986. The very heart of disability studies is the coinage of the UK social model of disability in 1983. The social model makes a clear "distinction between disability (social exclusion) and impairment (physical limitation) and the claim that disabled people are an oppressed group" (Shakespeare 215). By acknowledging how physical impairment, and the stigma associated with it, are not bound to one another, the social model became a

fundamental principle for the field that moved away from the assumption of disability as a setback. The social model dictated that it is actually society, barriers to access, and ableist biases that disable the impaired, not the impairment in and of itself. While this framework illustrates the positive work disability studies does in questioning naturalized assumptions about embodiment, it is also a primary example of disability essentialism, one of the more significant quandaries in disability studies. Anna Mollow defines disability essentialism as the representation of "'the experiences, needs, desires, and aims of all disabled people are assumed to be the same'" (qtd in Lukin 313). Tom Shakespeare points out that the concept of the social model was authored "by a small group of activists, the majority of whom had spinal injury or other physical impairments and were white heterosexual men" (217). Ultimately, the social model demonstrates a long-standing problem in disability studies of prioritizing white men with physical disabilities as the master narrative of the field, and the final say on disability, while overlooking other groups, namely black subjects living with a range of physical, mental, health, and cognitive disabilities.

Some of the major, field-shaping theory that has come out of disability studies in the last 30 years includes David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder's narrative prosthesis, which identifies two patterns in the literary treatment of disability. When disability appears in a text, it is often used as a plot device, which would be the case in Clint Eastwood's *Million Dollar Baby* (2004). The film follows amateur boxer and underdog, Maggie Fitzgerald, as she trains to get into a title fight only to become a quadriplegic after getting seriously injured during the match at the film's conclusion. Her trainer then comes to her bedside at the hospital and kills her out of pity. We get no sense of interiority from Maggie, what her thoughts and emotions are around her injury or how it will change her life. She's merely disabled to give the film some sense of tragedy and

emotional stakes, and then murdered suggesting that a life as a quadriplegic isn't worth living. The other common pattern Mitchell and Snyder highlight is using disability as a metaphor about society or a specific character (10). Tiny Tim in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* (1843) is an example of this relegation of disability to character quirks. He's an angelic character with no humanizing qualities who serves no significant purpose in the text other than to an emotional spectacle to the readers. Regardless of whether a text uses either pattern or both, for Mitchell and Snyder, these representations of disability circle back to the naturalized understanding of disability as an inherent problem.

Another concept central to the field is Robert McRuer's compulsory able-bodiedness. Because heteronormativity not only depends on a heterosexual bodymind, but an able-bodied subject as the ideal, McRuer asserts that heterosexuality and able-bodiedness are bound up together (372). Heterosexuality and able-bodiedness produce the able-bodied, heterosexual subject as the desirable standard, but they present an illusion of choice for those who don't fall under these norms. Ultimately, as far as embodiment is concerned, people living in an ableist, heteronormative society have no choice. Subjects can either identify with and aspire to the normative or constantly affirm for others that being able-bodied and heteronormative is the optimum mode of being.

A particularly unique characteristic about disability studies is that it's one of only a few academic disciplines that is greatly informed by the public activist work lay citizens carry out on behalf of disability rights. Much of the activism is ironically modeled after the litigation strategies and methods of civil disobedience made famous during the Civil Rights Era. Davis theorizes that the reason the civil rights movement has been a prominent framework for disability activism is that it "seemed to offer a better paradigm. Not plagued by God nor beset by disease,

people with disabilities were seen as minority citizens deprived of their rights by a dominant ableist majority" (264). What the civil rights era offered disability activism was the concept of a minority identity and the binary power dynamics of oppression. Highlighting the disabled as a minority group subjugated by the able-bodied in a similar fashion to the racialized oppression blacks experienced under a white center eliminates the individualized understanding of disability as a medical burden or divine retribution for immorality or societal corruption.

The first wave of disability rights activism in the US effectively began with protests against the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.[5] Activists staged a march on Washington, and in San Francisco, with what would later be called the "504 Demonstration," protestors occupied the San Francisco Departments of Health, Education, and Welfare for 25 days. Both disruptive acts eventually led to the inclusion of anti-discrimination legislation in the Rehabilitation Act for Disabled Americans. This first wave ended in 1990 with the landmark passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which helped solidify disability as an identity category with political potential for solidarity just like race, gender, etc.[6]

In addition to public policy, disability activism has greatly influenced academia. Scholars like Brenda Brueggemann and Margaret Price have written extensively about how the education system has been greatly influenced by an ableist, "one-size-fits-all" approach to instruction and testing, in which one, static, individuated way of learning is upheld as the norm that all students must adhere to and be measured by (Brueggemann et al 13). I would argue that strategies like

[5] The 1973 Rehabilitation Act prohibits discrimination against disability in regards to federal employment, government agencies, and services.
[6] The Americans with Disabilities Act or ADA prohibits hiring discrimination against those with disabilities and mandates greater institutional and societal inclusivity for the disabled through public accommodations and government services.

Universal Design, that express the importance of communal learning environments and a tailored, dynamic curriculum that speaks to a diverse array of learning styles, needs, and abilities are due in large part to disability activism and scholarship. Over the last ten years, disability activism and ideology has further influenced the humanities, notably literary studies and history. In terms of history, historians aren't only going back to the archives and recovering forgotten or buried stories about disability, but re-considering how the contrasting value given to ability and difference influenced the creation of the modern-day nation-state, notions of national belonging, and what societal progress looks like in terms of the metaphoric national body, and the literal physical bodies of individual citizenry (Kudlick 766). First wave arguments about the way that disability is socially constructed rather than biologically determined, that is, the idea that disability isn't naturally a disadvantage, but rather social barriers create the disadvantage–all trickle into the thematic treatment of embodiment in literary studies. This field has moved beyond essentialism and towards a consideration of, as Davis puts it, "the signification of bodies, and the national interests in producing templates for bodies and souls" (310). The successes of disability activism and the rise of disability as an identity category push literary theorists to consider the ways that, in addition to race and gender, bodyminds are placed into molds of normative and disabled, and all of the overdetermination that ensues with this placement. How a bodymind is presented in a text as normative or disabled, the importance or lack thereof given to a character deemed different, as well as how disability determines what a character wants in a text, are becoming increasingly crucial to textual analyses, just as race and gender have now become commonplace lens used to unpack texts.

A particularly unique characteristic about disability studies is that it is an academic discipline that is greatly informed by the public activist work lay citizens carry out on behalf of

disability rights. The issues that activist movements focus on greatly shapes the direction of the field, and similarly, the strategies critics theorize within the field shape the approaches that activists take. There is an additional cross-pollination where prominent disability rights activists went on to play a central part in theoretical work within the field. Paul K. Longmore for instance, headed pivotal demonstrations that led to greater rights for workers with disabilities, and also played a prominent role in the development of disability studies. As an historian and a pioneer of disability publishing, Longmore is responsible for recovering the lost history of disability in America, and making the case for including disability as an imperative lens in historical approaches with essay collections like *Why I Burned My Book and Other Essays on Disability* (2003). Jim Charlton is another activist-turned-scholar who authored *Nothing About Us Without Us: Disability Oppression and Empowerment* (2000), which is one of the earliest works within disability studies to highlight the intersections between ableism, and more commonly understood types of subjugation like racism and sexism. Charlton's insight was so pivotal to disability studies discourse and the disability rights movement because he insisted that the voices of the disabled must be placed at the forefront of legislative efforts. In other words, according to Charlton, no effective disability policy can be created without the active participation of the disabled community.

The disabled community may occupy space on the fringes of society, but more times than not, disability studies has favored the paradigm of those who are closest in approximation to the heteronormative ideal of whiteness, as if disabled people are not also people of color. The consequence of reiterating the representational dynamics of the mainstream has been a one-sided conversation in the literature that attempts to press forward the plight of the disabled by disregarding the subjugation of other groups, as if they can be separated. Take for instance

Shakespeare's efforts to distinguish between the oppression experienced by the disabled and all other marginalized groups. Shakespeare asserts that as opposed to the disabled, "there is nothing intrinsically problematic about being female or having a different sexual orientation, or a different skin pigmentation or body shape…Remove the social discrimination, and women and people of color and gay and lesbian people will be able to flourish and participate. But disabled people face both discrimination and intrinsic limitations" (220). To paraphrase Shakespeare, the singular barrier women, LGBT, and people of color all face is social inequality. According to Shakespeare, once this barrier is removed, oppression ceases, whereas the unique battle that disabled subjects face is both social inequality and the historically-endorsed notion that there is something intrinsically wrong with the disabled that must be cured. Shakespeare's assertion about resolving generations-long subjugation is ambitious but flawed in its simplicity. Furthermore, Shakespeare assumes a false parity between the aforementioned groups. It is true that racism, sexism, and homophobia are all interlocking systems of oppression that all fall underneath the same, larger hegemony. But these systems aren't created equally, and the stakes for each are not the same. Furthermore, Shakespeare's conclusion bypasses people who occupy all or more than one of the identity categories he lists. Lastly, while essentialism is a reality for the disabled that no amount of inclusion will resolve, it is not exclusive to the disabled. There's a well-documented history of the ways that violence against people of color and LGBT was justified by the belief that their physical appearance or sexual preferences were external signs of something internally deviant. I make these points to demonstrate that in the process of focusing solely on disability as a marginalizing experience, scholars like Shakespeare miss out on the opportunity to consider the more complex embodiment of those who are Othered in more ways than just impairment, and also the connections between groups.

A faction that has recently surfaced in opposition to scholars who centralize disability, are those who view identity as a hackneyed topic with little discursive usefulness anymore, which while well-meaning, reeks of privilege. Amongst this discourse, there is a clear fatigue with identity politics as outlined in Davis's argument that "all these positions [on identity] have merit, but are probably indefensible rationally. The idea of maintaining a category of being just because oppressive people in the past created it so they could exploit a segment of the population, does not make sense" (269). Davis is correct to highlight the limitations of identity politics. As I discuss in later chapters, there are limitations to identity politics as it does reiterate existing power dynamics. However, identity isn't a theme that should be completely abandoned. Self-reflection and acknowledging one's own privilege in seeking to abandon identity is important, as many groups haven't had the freedom to shape their identity for long enough in order to dismantle it. Furthermore, Davis's assumptions about the importance of identity for other groups is inaccurate, even dismissive. He gives power back to the center by suggesting that identity pride exists in some indirect way because of "oppressive people," when these movements were created in order to take power back from the center.

Mitchell and Snyder gesture towards this problematic rejection of disability as a strategy for counteracting racist rhetoric. They point out that disability and ethnic studies have been uneasy allies at best, because communities of color have focused on distancing themselves "from debilitating physical and cognitive associations, they inevitably positioned disability as the 'real' limitation from which they must escape'" (Mitchell and Snyder 2). According to Mitchell and Snyder, what's at the heart of racism isn't even race, but ableism. What undergirds racism is a master narrative in which people of color are the physical and cognitive inferiors to whiteness. And consequently, it isn't really racism alone that groups push against, but the association of

people of color with the stigma of impairment. Mitchell and Snyder's argument thus offers a more comprehensive understanding of how racism operates, by noting how the rhetoric of physical and cognitive inferiority informs and naturalizes racist stratification. In this instance, Mitchell and Snyder explicitly discuss people of color as a larger community, but the strategic rejection of disability they observe amongst communities of color is particularly relevant to black subjects because there's a long-standing connection between blackness and disability. In "Lunacy and Liberation: Black Crime, Disability, and the Production and Eradication of the Early National Enemy," Andrea Stone contends that from the colonial origins of the nation, "blackness, and particularly in this case disabled blackness" were deemed "radically incompatible with national belonging" (113). Stone demonstrates how important it is to pay close attention to how disability and blackness work together, and not let blackness slip through the cracks of a larger-sweeping focus on people of color because the national fabric was predicated on a connotation of blackness with disability and criminality.[7]

The prioritizing of young, healthy white citizens means that black subjects, disabled and able-bodied alike, are the most disenfranchised because there is an assumed and inherent "brokenness" to blackness that is both racialized and ableist. Therefore, the marginalization of black people informs the marginalization of all other groups. When we take into account the

[7] One such example of this linkage between blackness and disability is the broadside Stone focuses her entire essay around, entitled, *Dying Confession of Pomp, A Negro Man, Who Was Executed at Ipswich, on the 6th August, 1795, for Murdering Capt. Charles Furbush, of Andover, Taken from the Mouth of the Prisoner, and Penned by Jonathan Plummer, an enslaved person (1795).* This broadside is a published confession of enslaved person, Pomp's, murder of his enslaver. What's thought-provoking about the document, is Pomp's mention of the mental torment he endured right before he committed the murder. The rationale of this broadside implies that enslaved black subjects need to be policed more because, like Pomp, they are so prone to mental depravity. Thus, the primary threat to the newly independent nation wasn't just black enslaved subjects, but those who had become mentally undone because of overly benign enslavers.

bond of racism and ableism, it's plausible as to why black people and communities of color have historically distanced themselves from disability by placing so much stock in archetypes like the Strong Black Woman. However, because ableism justifies racial subjugation, it's imperative that we look at disability and depart from the naturalized value of normativity and ability because these systems of oppression work hand in hand. In order to fully contend with racism, you have to step away from ableism as well. Thus, black disability studies offers much needed and new approaches to the complexity of black bodyminds.

III.

Because of the relative novelty of black disability studies within an already young field of broader disability studies, my goal in this dissertation is to contribute to this budding scholarly field by challenging the myth of black hyper ability, as illustrated through the Strong Black Woman, and complicating notions of black strength. Prominent anthologies and special journal issues that focus on race and disability like *Blackness and Disability: Critical Examinations and Cultural Interventions* (2011), edited by Christopher Bell, focus mostly on the micro-level work of close readings and an exploration of the rhetorical stakes of creative works. However, greater consideration of what the larger shape of black disability studies looks like is needed, as well as the unifying patterns, central questions, and methodology that together make black disability studies praxis distinguishable. Thus, in addition to offering my own observations from this dissertation, I want to briefly present what some scholars have mapped out as the key goals of black disability studies, its approach to identity, the extent to which black disability studies is similar and different from the larger field of disability studies, and the interventions that this sub-field makes.

Christopher M. Bell's landmark essay, "Introducing White Disability Studies: A Modest Proposal" (2005) states that an explicit goal of black disability studies is to examine the ramifications of racism and ableism for black subjects. It's important to mention that some disability studies critics have explored race thematically in individual works, like Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's exploration of bodily variety in black women's writing in *Extraordinary Bodies* (1996). However, many scholars pinpoint "Introducing White Disability Studies" as the beginning of black disability studies. This timely piece shows how universalized frameworks in disability studies, like the social model, only speak to specific groups. Bell even asserts (however tongue-in-cheek) that "White Disability Studies" should have its own sub-categorical designation to acknowledge how "many white disabled people have cultural capital by virtue of their race and are, therefore, more on the inside than they are on the outside." Furthermore, white disabled scholars' ignorance of this privileged "positioning…is one of the hallmarks of White Disability Studies" (Bell 276). To depart from Bell's rationale, the failure of mainstream disability studies and the impetus for black disability studies is the attempt of the former to make white disability stand in for all disabled embodiment, when white disabled subjects' only marker of difference is impairment. Disabled or not, white disabled subjects enjoy greater access to the enfranchisement of white privilege than others. Frameworks like the social model, cultivated out of the experiences of white men, therefore do not speak to the most marginalized. Bell's essay is a turning point in disability studies history because it is one of the earliest instances in which a scholar explicitly challenges canonized authors in the field like Simi Linton and Joseph Shapiro, and points out how race is often either completely absent from the conversation or clumsily brought up as an after-thought. Bell shows the stakes of failing to talk about race by illustrating how whiteness has become the unquestioned norm within the field.

Admittedly, drawing a line between black and white disability studies is potentially divisive and reiterates the simplistic black-white racial binary. Nonetheless, Bell creates discursive space for the greater diversity that currently exists within the field, and critics who tackle race and disability like Erevelles and Mollow. Bell additionally does the much-needed work of pulling white disability out of its cloak of anonymity. Just as Bell exposed whiteness as the default mode of being within disability studies, I intend to build on this foundational work by exposing all the problems with making ability the default mode of being for black women. The assumption that blackness and disability are divergent, and that disability doesn't affect black people is the through-line of the Strong Black Woman, and I perceive it as the major reason why disability studies has been so white. When black subjects are only perceived as capable of a criminalizing sense of impairment, and effectively cut off from the humanizing vulnerabilities of impairment, whiteness and disability become wedded to one another. The historically white-focused operations of disability studies reflect this dominant attitude. Thus, my project furthers the case for greater inclusivity in disability studies by revealing more nuanced portraits of disabled black womanhood in literature.

As opposed to the singular focus on impairment within the larger field of disability studies, black disability studies acknowledges that impairment is always intersectional, and context based. And just as context constantly changes, so too does impairment. Pickens states that in looking at black disability, scholars "must attend to how audiences (broadly defined) and the disabled accept, eschew, or manipulate the narratives in flux… blackness and disability…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" (95). To conduct analysis of blackness and disability, context is always key.

Rather than bring to a text your own prior knowledge about a given disability or a type of bodymind, you analyze that impairment within the microcosm of the work. That means that how the character defines their impairment and how they're viewed by others, and any racial, class, sexual, gender or situational factors that the disability springs from are all relevant to a comprehensive analysis. Take for instance, as I examine more fully in Chapter Three, how the protagonist Onyesonwu in Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* (2010) is a sorceress with supernatural capabilities. Instead of aligning her with mainstream representations of witchcraft, which are often crafted as fantasy worlds of escapism for audiences, Onyesonwu's abilities occur in an explicitly African context, and they are linked to weaponized sexual assault and multiracial identity, which stigmatize her in her own community. These cultural factors speak to the realities of post-colonial Africa, and they all work together to shape Onyesonwu's variant bodymind. A context-based analysis means that intersecting identity categories shape disability, and disability in turn, informs these factors. Thus, as identity categories change from context to context, within black disability studies there is an understanding of power as a constantly fluctuating phenomenon that isn't exclusive to one particular type of bodymind. What may be stigmatizing in one context, can be a means of agency in another.

Within black disability studies, impairment is not only context-based and intersectional, but according to Pickens, when black disability exists in a text, it isn't coded as a problem. Often in popular texts, if disability is a theme, it's something that needs to be cured. And if cure is impossible, the character with the impairment must die.[8] I would assert that this thematic

[8] Lennie, from John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1937) exemplifies this plot device. Intellectually disabled, Lennie doesn't know his own strength, and accidentally kills creatures throughout the novel, making his disability a central problem. Because his disability can't be cured in order to resolve the conflict of these incidental murders, at the novel's conclusion he is killed to spare him the vitriol of an angry mob.

approach to disability can be attributed to the medical understanding of disability, which has been institutionally endorsed up until the latter half of the 20th century. The medical understanding of disability identifies impairment as an individual problem to be corrected through medical intervention. To complicate Pickens' argument that disability carries no stigma in texts when black, disabled characters are at the center, the novels I explore in this dissertation centralize black disabled characters. And because these texts are told from the disabled character's perspective, disability isn't a source of conflict for the characters, as Pickens suggests. Disability doesn't shape the trajectory of their character arcs, and it's not something protagonists are obsessed with curing. However, the conflict for characters is ultimately trying to thrive in a society that almost always takes up issue with black women having impairment. I find that the Strong Black Woman is the unspoken standard that helps to explain this intolerance to disability. Characters in these texts frequently have the option to either perform the resiliency of the Strong Black Woman or perish. My dissertation is most interested in the outcome when the Strong Black Woman is rejected as an option. This rejection reveals how impairment may not be a problem for the protagonist, but in an ableist society, a disabled black woman is frequently read as a problem. Thus, black disability that's centralized in a work tells readers more about dominant attitudes than it does about impairment, and how characters try to manage their lives in spaces where black impairment isn't tolerated.

The effort to depart from understanding impairment as a problem is what connects black disability studies to the larger field; however, where the two differ is over disability metaphors. I define disability metaphors as various instances of figurative language—colloquial expressions, symbols, or allegories, to name a few-- in which disability is used to describe something that

isn't explicitly about impairment.[9] Overall, disability studies views disability metaphors as unavoidably problematic because they belittle the lived experiences of the disabled. However, black disability studies scholars like Pickens affirm that these devices offer discursive potential about race, class, gender, and sexuality, and should not be completely abandoned. Pickens writes that "disability can operate as a proxy for another social or cultural system while also describing a material condition. In this way, Sami Schalk maintains that disability metaphors 'allow us to explore the historical and material connections between disability and other social systems of privilege and oppression'" (96). I see the divide over disability metaphors stemming from different approaches to impairment. Because black disability studies scholars, as mentioned earlier, understand impairment as intersectional and not singular and isolated, there's a usefulness to disability metaphors. These metaphors can do the dual work of revealing insight about disability, other identity categories, and interlocking systems of oppression. In chapter two of my dissertation, I find that instead of using metaphors to ruminate about intersectionality, Audre Lorde and Meri Nana-Ama Danquah interestingly use metaphors to try to express what is inexplicable about their impairment, suggesting that disability metaphors can both embody and help to explain the unfathomable black bodymind disabled by pain.

While disability studies has overlooked blackness, the implicit ableism of racial pride has led to a similar erasure of disability amongst black communities. I would further contend that the plight of black disabled subjects is in many ways similar to the erasure of black women among civil rights and feminist groups, as black feminist critics have documented. The ignorance of intersectionality and the fact that black subjects can identify with more marginalized identity

[9] For instance, the use of blindness to describe one's own ignorance (i.e. I was blind to his scheming) would be an example of a disability metaphor.

categories than race, is a reality that connects black women and disabled subjects. Because the normalization of excessive black physical ability makes disabled bodyminds unfathomable and unreadable, one of the more definitive principles of black disability studies is diversifying blackness by recovering the stories of disabled figures. There are many historical black subjects who, through commercialization and revisionist history, have been made over into sentimentalized, aspirational figures. But a negative consequence of these inspirational legends is that frequently there is little to no room for disability, when it is relevant. Bell therefore declares that a fundamental principle in black disability studies is going back in the archives, retrieving these figures, and recovering the nuances of their lived experience that the mainstream would erase or overlook. For Bell, "the work of reading black and disabled bodies is not only recovery work, as demonstrated in previously mentioned discussion of…Emmett Till, and [James] Byrd, but work that requires a willingness to deconstruct the systems that would keep those bodies in separate spheres" (3). This recovery effort is invaluable because discovering and making plain the impairment of well-known figures like Till gives nuance to their violent encounters with institutional and cultural racism. We find that their disability plays just as significant of a part as race in how black subjects are marked and mistreated. For instance, the presumed whistle that cost Till his life could have very well been a strategy for managing a polio-related speaking disability.[10] This insight further complicates the master narratives about black male-white female sexual relations and propriety popularly drawn around the Till case. The lynching of Byrd to some extent happened because he had a seizure disorder that prevented him from driving, leading to that fatal day in 1998, in which he accepted a ride from the white supremacists who

[10] For further discussion of Till's little-known disability, see Finger.

would beat and drag him to death. Taken together, these impairments demonstrate how fatally high the stakes of disability are for black subjects in contrast to their white counterparts, and more importantly how devastating racialized systems like slavery and Jim Crow can be. Recovering disability reveals that the effectiveness of these institutions of racial oppressions wasn't just in their combination of racializing and eroticizing blackness, as black feminists and queer of color critics have argued, but in maiming and wearing down black bodyminds.

Ultimately, black disability studies is relatively new and timely in the intersectional work it engages in. However, to be clear, black authors have discussed disabled embodiment and the perceptions of impaired black bodyminds since the era of slave narratives. I gesture towards a few illustrative examples to prove the prominence of disability in African American literature, and to also show the expansiveness of this discourse. Black disability isn't a trend from the past or the present. It is a theme that authors consistently address and complicate. Notably, within the genre of slave narratives, a way for authors to prove to white readers the inhumanity of slavery was to construct graphic details that presented the enslaved subject's scarred and maimed bodymind as evidence. Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859), an early novel published by an African American woman, is one such example of this effort to use disability as an emotional appeal to verify the cruelty of slavery and its expansive impact, appearing in the North as indentured servitude. *Our Nig* is an autobiographical account of Wilson's experiences as an indentured servant to a white family in the North, as well as the physical and emotional torture she endured until the end of her contract at eighteen years old. A constant motif in the text is the various forms of corporeal punishment that the protagonist, Frado (who is a stand-in for Wilson), suffers at the hands of her mistress, Mrs. Bellmont. These beatings leave Frado with life-long disability that is often met with further repulsion from Mrs. Bellmont:

> [Frado] would sit at the table to wash her dishes; if she heard the well-known step of her mistress, she would rise till she returned to her room…Of course she was no longer than usual in completing the services assigned her. This was a subject of complaint to Mrs. Bellmont; and Frado endeavored to throw off all appearance of sickness in her presence. But it was increasing upon her, and she could no longer hide her indisposition. Her mistress entered one day, and finding her seated, commanded her to go to work. 'I am sick,'…Angry that she should venture a reply to her command, she suddenly inflicted a blow which lay the tottering girl prostrate on the floor. (Wilson 46)

Frado's bodymind is so worn down from the labor of slavery and the beatings from Mrs. Bellmont that she literally can't stand up. Ultimately, the nature of Frado's disability paired with Mrs. Bellmont's expectation of continued top-rate performance is a paradox that works to racialize her. In other words, the expectation for blacks to maintain bodily resilience, mobility, and endurance despite injury and disability reflects different labor expectations of blacks and whites where the limitations and vulnerabilities of being human are acknowledged with whites, while blacks are expected, despite impairment, to be mobile and to work at the same pace as a fully able-bodied individual. Ultimately, debilitation suggests that labor in the 1800s for blacks was a dead-end and a proverbial rock and a hard place, where you either refuse to work or work to survive, only to gradually become disabled in the process. Regardless of the outcome, the larger message is the necessity yet expendability of black laborers as work-horses exploited until they are completely disabled or dead.

As archival work has demonstrated, the Harlem Renaissance was invested in moving away from the antebellum-era representation of blackness as overly simplistic and agrarian, and instead a heterogenous community complexly varied in terms of class, geographic location, and

sexuality. The recent recovery of Renaissance icon Claude McKay's lost novel, *Romance in Marseille* (2020) further contributes to the era's meditation on embodied diversity, as it explicitly discusses amputation and black subjects' relationship to medical spaces. In *Romance in Marseille,* Lafala, a West African sailor, sues a New York shipping company for the loss of his legs, and wins a lump sum of money that he uses to return to Marseille to find the Moroccan prostitute who swindled him out of money towards the novel's beginning. Ultimately, Lafala loses his legs after sleeping on a New York-bound ship and getting frostbite. The way that he discovers the amputation is both tragic and disorienting as Lafala lays in his hospital bed and bemoans that he is "in a strange land, without home, without friends, without resources, without his greatest asset—his faithful feet! Why had the doctors saved him? He had often heard his ignorant companions say that hospitals were the final passage to the grave for poor and unknown persons (McKay 10). The depiction of Lafala in a "strange land" establishes a discordant tone. Lafala's feelings of alienation in this new city are met with comparable feelings of estrangement from his newly amputated bodymind. Readers are supposed to read the loss of Lafala's legs as a tragic event of significance, a far cry from contemporary disability pride.

Ann Petry's *The Street,* written and published over 10 years later, similarly depicts disability as a grotesque spectacle through the brothel owner, Mrs. Hedges. The narrator, Lutie, describes Mrs. Hedges as "awe-inspiring…Her hands, her feet, and what could be seen of her legs were a mass of scars—terrible scars.…Lutie thought Mrs. Hedges had the appearance of a creature that had strayed from some other planet" (Petry 237). Both texts, to an extent, perceive disability in negative terms; however, impairment doesn't come to define either Mrs. Hedges or Lafala. Lafala's amputated legs symbolize a loss of his former life, but what ironically coincides with this intimate confessional of mourning, is the skepticism amongst Lafala's peers about

hospitals. Not only do hospital staff fail in providing adequate care for black patients, but in what grazes the boundaries of paranoia, Lafala's friends view hospitals as spaces where black people are exploited for scientific advancement rather than for care. Although Lafala scoffs at his peers, viewing them as misguided, this juxtaposition of his amputation with the ever-present communal threat of exploitation suggests that black disability is never a personal matter of individual responsibility, but rather is attached to a larger history of exploitation and mistreatment.

The black disability studies scholars I connect back to throughout this dissertation include Pickens, Mollow, and Schalk. In the introduction to the *African American Review's* 2015 special edition on blackness and disability, Pickens points out that the conflict between black rights groups' historic rejection of disability, and white disability groups' rejection of blackness as strategies for gaining greater equality is a tension that a black disability studies approach allows to "rest uneasily at the surface since it shapes the exigencies of our theorizing" (97). In analyzing the Strong Black Woman, a trope that embodies the rejection of disability in favor of ableist narratives of black excellence, I explore the underlying principles that reinforce this divide. To say that in the past, black people have dismissed disability is partially true, but overly simplistic. What's seldom recognized when critics point out this repudiation is the implicit apprehension about fragility, and the assumption that a resilient and resistant blackness can't also demonstrate vulnerability. Fragility presumably threatens romanticized notions of blackness. However, in gesturing back to the social model, the popularity of this ideology in disability studies suggests a similar desire to do away with the stigma of disability as an inherently depraved and inferior existence by separating out impairment and disability. Thus, while black studies has sought to distance themselves from disability, this field, along with disability studies, demonstrates a similar uneasiness with everything that makes impairment an unpleasant, fragile experience,

notably, the dependency, the sickness, and the potential fatality of impairment. Fragility is an ironic common ground between black studies and disability studies. Critics like Mollow brilliantly prove that for people of color living with chronic and potentially fatal illness, disability and impairment cannot be separated as the social model suggests, and that the field needs new definitions that reflect these experiences. My hope is that these chapters contribute to efforts to re-define key terms within the field by gesturing towards a more comprehensive definition of disability that takes into account both vulnerability and strength. Lastly, just as Schalk maintains that an intersectional approach in black disability studies doesn't just mean superficially identifying and labeling intersectionality in a text, but rather, focusing on gender and race in order to surmise how ability functions in a text, and vice versa (4), I focus on disabled characters to unearth societal expectations of black women. Ultimately, I've found that within texts that centralize a black disabled female protagonist, racialized narratives about ability and the gendered perception of black women as masculine, collide in the expectation of black women to labor selflessly to the point of self-erasure. The way these characters upset expectations and present their own individualized sense of strength rooted in disabled embodiment can help critics move past the stage of criticizing the Strong Black Woman, and actually consider human alternatives to black womanhood.

IV.

By intersecting black feminist theory and disability studies, I hope readers come to see that although these fields seem divergent, they help address the reality that black womanhood isn't a monolith, and neither are representations of black women. Placing these fields together only helps scholars more accurately analyze the greater diversity that exists within African American literature in terms of black female embodiment. Another major takeaway I hope to

impress upon readers, particularly black feminist theorists, is how bound up normativity, sexism, and racism all are, and that a conversation about black female embodiment is incomplete without discussing disability. If critics are going to examine how gender and race mark black women, it's imperative to consider normativity as the overarching value system that dictates that all bodily distinctions from the white heteronormative ideal are inherently deviant. Because the Strong Black Woman rejects all presumable weakness, nonetheless disability, rather than champion this longstanding trope as a marker of racial pride, she should be critically repudiated. The Strong Black Woman is unavoidably problematic because she offers a narrow representation of black womanhood that rebuffs difference. While the ideals of the Strong Black Woman are motivational, the way that this figure leaves no space for other kinds of being, reverses efforts towards greater rights. The Strong Black Woman strips black women of a humanizing sense of complexity, and reduces them to domineering, self-effacing workhorses.

Despite all of the flaws with the Strong Black Woman, what ties together the authors I explore in this dissertation is a pattern of salvaging the useful qualities of this trope, and discarding the rest. In other words, these writers keep the survivalism and the disruptive resistance of the Strong Black Woman, and discard her ableist and essentialist tendencies that shut out so many other lived experiences, in order to arrive at a new notion of strength that accounts for vulnerability and reveals greater humanity. This sense of strength that I evolve in my project does away with the romance of the Strong Black Woman and her inclination towards heroism. Some of the women in the novels I analyze accomplish unfathomable tasks, some just survive and get through the day, and others aren't always able to save themselves, nonetheless others. But even in failure, these characters weave together a thought-provoking commentary about society and the limited position often carved out for all black women, no matter how much

effort she makes to adhere to standards of heteronormativity or not. What's at the heart of this strength isn't service to others, but a discourse about the social perceptions and treatment of black women.

My dissertation focuses on works in the contemporary period to give a sense of currency and exigency to my project by showcasing what black female authors recently and even right now are saying about conventional notions of strength. The oldest work I examine, *Sula* (1973) was published during the Black Arts Movement era, while the rest of the texts are fairly contemporary, ranging from the 1980s to the early 2010s. With regards to the 1980s and 1990s, this was an era in which a prolific amount of black women's writing was produced. A greater number of works authored by black women doesn't necessarily mean an increase in the number of texts on black female disability. However, I've found that this is an era in which a greater number of voices speaking means a greater variety of different kinds of characters. The publication period of many of the works I examine comes off the heels of the progress and regression made during the Civil Rights movement, which was incredibly male-centered. Thus, I characterize the end of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st century as a moment in which black female writers collectively and explicitly rejected essentialism and the male-centric notion of proper black womanhood that the Strong Black Woman represents. This rejection allowed for experimentation with more diverse black female characters and different lived experiences that don't always adhere to the strict ramifications of normativity and gender rules for black women.

Although I look at texts from different genres, and I cover a range of issues, the through-line that ties the chapters together is each text's relationship to disability and to the Strong Black Woman. In regards to how I conceptualize the term, disability, I exercise a broadened understanding of impairment as not only physical differences traditionally understood as

disability like wheelchair use and amputation, but also mental illness, and markings that stigmatize the bodymind and distinguish it from the able-bodied standard. I explicitly use a broad understanding of disability to push against the *social model* and the *medical model* of disability, which understands disability as a medicalized, personal problem to be eliminated through cure or rehabilitation at all costs. These are imperative frameworks that I return to throughout my project. Although scholars champion the social model for its departure from the ableism of the medical model, it greatly restricts what gets classified as impairment, and what doesn't, leading to a privileging of visible, physical disabilities over other kinds of impairment. I find that the social model is wholly inadequate at defining disability because of this exclusivity, as well as its focus on the physical, exterior body, which, when applied to disabled black women who have a lengthy history of being reduced to carnal bodies, is tragically ironic. Thus, I intend with my conception of disability to both reject the narrow constraints of the social model, and to contribute to efforts to redefine disability within the field.

Each text I examine uses bodily variant characters to challenge, to varying extents, the expectations for black women to be resilient and dependable and most importantly, to overcome adversity at all costs. I've found that the degree to which the characters from text to text accept or reject disability, adversely affects the degree to which they accept or reject the standards of the Strong Black Woman. For instance, with Chapter one, the protagonists of Sapphire's *Push* (1996) and Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973) assert a black feminist sense of subversion that's dismissive of disability as unimportant. They consequently reinforce the performative brashness of the Strong Black Woman. However, this performance leads to no progress, as they end their texts in the same marginalized places that they began with, while the character who demonstrates a queered embrace of her disability, Eva Peace, enjoys the greatest autonomy and actualization.

The primary texts of Chapter two illustrate the most ambiguous relationship to disability and the Strong Black Woman out of the entire dissertation. The authors of these memoirs don't identify with disability as a political identity; nonetheless, they put forth commentary that echoes and even anticipates central theory within disability studies, and they make the effort to incorporate their impairment into a new understanding of the self and the bodymind. As a consequence of this contradictory thematic treatment of disability, the Strong Black Woman plays an equally fraught role in the texts as an adversary to healing at times, and the primary means of articulating experiences with illness at other times. By contrast, the novels in chapter three most explicitly accept disability, and all of its strengths and setbacks. The heroines additionally embrace disability as a political identity that is expressed through the supernatural. In these works, disability becomes the basis of radical belief systems and movements against hegemonic power structures. Because the paradigms of these novels are so firmly rooted in disability, characters refuse to perform any romanticized notions of strength or heroism.

In gesturing towards the chapter breakdown of this dissertation, chapter one examines *Sula* and *Push*, paying close attention to the ramifications of *grotesque strength* in these novels. I define grotesque strength as a physically and spiritually subversive quality found in some black female characters with visible markers of difference. Considering that the protagonists in these novels are obese, have missing limbs, scars, and birthmarks, and a number of other stigmatizing features, they are grotesque in the physical sense of the term. This chapter connects to the larger history of enfreakment[11] that has normalized the presentation of all black women (disabled or

[11] Term coined by David Hevey to name the process of transforming people with disabilities into not only freaks, but also the "the anchor of the weird [for the non-disabled spectator]…the site and symbol of all alienation...psychic alienation made physical" (Hevey 444).

able-bodied) as possessing excess flesh, excess attitude, and therefore excess deviance. To help me frame these novels in the appropriate historical context of enfreakment, I draw from the works of black feminist critics Hortense Spillers, Nicole Fleetwood, Ange-Marie Hancock, and Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman. Previous conversations about black enfreakment have stopped at addressing sexuality. In other words, what has popularly been understood as the bloodline of black freakishness is unrelenting black eroticism in all its excess and aberrance as opposed to the propriety of whiteness. Where my commentary on black female enfreakment differs is my inclusion of grotesquerie and disability theory. Just like the traditional grotesque, the characters' visibly variant bodyminds in *Push* and *Sula* turn them into spectacles within their communities. But the invasive stares they are constantly subjected to, scrutinize their social value and turn them into objects of Otherness rather than objects of desire. Thus, grotesque strength isn't just about the sexual fetishism behind watching that black feminist conversations have exclusively focused on, but also how bodyminds become the Other through the act of watching.

Like the Strong Black Woman, these characters in Morrison's and Sapphire's novels exude independence and survivalism. But where they depart from this trope is in their failure to conquer their adversity and their character arcs are largely flat from the beginning to the end of the texts. Central questions in this chapter include: What does black female strength look like when the end goal in a text isn't political agency or the achievement of the overcoming narrative, but is instead an embrace of otherness and flesh? And how do grotesque characters' inabilities or outright refusal to acquire hegemonic success reveal the interconnections between normativity and success? I argue that, in facing failure and even death, these characters extend the grotesque beyond mere spectacle and appearance into a subversive mode of being that troubles how success is conventionally defined, questions the naturalized expectations of black women, and

challenges the validity of literacy and education as universal equalizers. Characters Precious and Sula Peace gain their strength by embracing what society stigmatizes and challenging the ideals that label them grotesque. However, while Precious and Sula actively speak out against the institutions that disenfranchise them, they fail miserably, and Eva by contrast, refrains from vocal protest and manages her own grotesque microcosm, existing in *Sula* as a relatively successful, anti-hero. The disparity between these characters implies that honing a critical black feminist voice and performing the role of the rebellious Other isn't adequate. Ultimately, the community-building that Eva heads is the fully actualized potential of grotesque strength that Sula and Precious are unable to accomplish. My analysis of *Sula* and *Push* proves that grotesque theory is worth embracing as a critical and interpretive lens because it challenges the naturalized boundaries of normativity and deviance, and failure and success, offering black female characters, authors, and critics a way out of hegemonic structures.

In Chapter Two, my commentary expands on the stakes of black female voice by investigating the ways that black female patients attempt to establish subjecthood in the medical infrastructure. I look at Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals* (1980) and Mari Danquah's *Willow Weep for Me: A Black Woman's Journey through Depression* (1998). I selected these texts because they are contemporary memoirs about black women's experiences living with illness and navigating the medical industry that dovetail with the history of the medicalized exploitation of black women. Enslaved black women like Anarcha West were physically tortured and subjected to grueling experimentation, due to the assumption of unparalleled fortitude. These cruel acts were ironically carried out for the development of medical and pseudo-science branches like modern-day gynecology and Eugenics. Here I build on Deirdre Cooper Owens's *Medical Bondage: Race, Gender, and The Origins of American Gynecology* (2017) and Davis's

"Normality, Power, and Culture" (2013) to assert that the medical exploitation of black women has not only been a means of racialization and sexualization, as these critics have proven, but the medical industry has played a prominent role in informing and validating the Strong Black Woman narrative as well. A notion of *racial authenticity* or *authentic blackness* is the unspoken measure that Lorde and Danquah are frequently compared against, and that I reference as both a policing tool against variant subjects, and the ultimate currency of the Strong Black Woman. My discussion of racial authenticity leads me to the *long-suffering black woman,* another key concept I refer to throughout the chapter. The strength of the long-suffering black woman lies in her ability to endure pain over extended amounts of time and project her agony outwards. Because Lorde and Danquah do not emulate the long-suffering black woman by expressing their anguish outward in the form of entertainment or a stereotypically sassy attitude, they are deemed inauthentic. Throughout this project, I challenge how blackness is defined, as well as notions of success and failure. I suggest that concepts like success in African American literature should extend beyond a formulaic notion of conquering adversity. These narrative patterns where black characters overcome all kinds of obstacles from poverty to racism, puts the burden on the marginalized to do something about inequality, while removing blame from the larger issue of structural inequality.

On the one hand, Danquah's and Lorde's critique of medical authority coincides with many criticisms disability studies scholars have aimed at the medical industry, as a historically ableist sector. Their critique begins to unravel the rigid power dynamic between black female patients and presumably white medical authority. On the other hand, Lorde's and Danquah's explicit embrace and pursuit of cure, and Lorde's repeated reference to her strength and ability to overcome her cancer contradict disability studies efforts to build pride around disability.

Disability studies advocates are often leery of cure and overcomer narratives because they promote the idea that disabilities should be eliminated at all costs (even the life of the disabled individual) rather than a rights issue that should be accommodated. Prominent questions include: what tensions between race theory and disability studies does the embrace of strength and cure in *Willow* and *Cancer Journals* reveal? In addition to the overcoming narrative, are there other fundamental differences between the two fields and can these differences be reconciled? I argue that what undergirds these differences between disability studies and these two primary texts is the focus on the externalized body. While disability studies has privileged external, bodily impairment in order to validate it as an identity category, for black people, exteriority has only meant further dehumanization. In other words, being popularly represented as possessing "all body and no mind," acting on all the base urges of the body with no emotional or intellectual interiority, has only been used to justify further subjugation. Therefore, Lorde and Danquah, like so many black authors before them actively divorce themselves of exteriorization. The way that these texts about black women living with chronic illness clash with disability studies only reaffirms the timeliness of black disability studies.

My final chapter considers the supernatural, futuristic strength of central female figures in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* (2010). Both texts depict post-apocalyptic worlds that have come completely undone due to economic instability, political upheaval, and climate crises. Within these worlds, once reliable institutions of religion and top-down leadership are exposed as irrelevant and unable to properly address the present issues, at best, and purposely antagonistic and corrupt, at worst. The protagonists in these two novels, Lauren Olamina (*Parable*) and *Onyesonwu* (*Who Fears Death*), are supercrips who surface with their own value systems that modify conventions of Western religion, and offer a

solution to all the chaos. The *supercrip* is a crucial concept, and instance of nuanced, vulnerable strength that I examine. The supercrip is a disabled figure who accomplishes miraculous tasks that able-bodied people couldn't perform, either because of or in spite of impairment. In examining the characteristics of the supercrip, I find that this figure echoes the individual exceptionalism of the Strong Black Woman, but in the context of disability. All the women I analyze--whether they are grotesquely strong or supercrips—are all pariahs to some extent. These women are often anti-heroes who do not always secure the explicit goal of their character arc. Nonetheless, they lead their own communities, they exercise their own sense of control over their impairment, and they incorporate disability into a fully actualized sense of self. I argue that the work Lauren and Onyesonwu perform in heading their own spiritual communities, saving people from bondage all, and using their bodily variety to accomplish these fetes all closely resemble the supercrip.

Questions that guide the chapter are as follows: how does the performance of black female strength make supercrip narratives more or less visible? What are the qualities that make certain bodyminds more readily visible as a supercrip over others? While the supercrip is maligned in disability studies as a gross misrepresentation of life with impairment that diverts attention away from social stratification, I argue that when we move away from white masculine representations of the supercrip and racialize this figure, the supercrip becomes a redemptive iteration of the Strong Black Woman. When an author allows a black female supercrip to exist in a text with no signification to the Strong Black Woman, there's a tremendous amount of discursive potential. Essentially, the supercrip reveals nuances in intersecting systems of oppression, as well as the irony of normalized expectations for black female martyrdom when the subject in question is disabled. However, if the supercrip merely becomes a variation of the

Strong Black Woman, she reinforces much of the same trouble with overdetermination and essentialism that we have seen throughout this project with the conventional black fortitude. While the primary texts in this dissertation vary when it comes to their stance on disability and the Strong Black Woman, I juxtapose them in order to challenge the ableism of the Strong Black Woman and theorize notions of embodiment that salvage the survivalism and the poetic resistance of the figure, while emphasizing vulnerability as a key quality.

In the conclusion, I reiterate the major points and observations of each chapter as well as the thesis of the dissertation. I also consider the ties between the different instances of nuanced strength from each chapter, including grotesque strength, the long-suffering woman, and the black supercrip. Each instance of fortitude borrows some of the good qualities from the Strong Black Woman and does away with the rest. However, a distinguishing factor amongst the three is contrasting attitudes towards success and failure, and differing values attributed to emotional openness and the incorporation of disability into identity. I finally consider the contribution this dissertation makes to black feminist theory and disability studies, notably the conversation about embodied fragility in both fields.

Chapter 1

Too Much to Overcome: Grotesque Strength in Toni Morrison's *Sula* and Sapphire's *Push*

Sapphire's *Push* (1996) is a coming-of-age novel that takes place in 1980s Harlem, during the HIV/AIDS and crack/cocaine crises that swept the nation. *Push* follows an illiterate, single black sixteen-year-old mother, Claireece Precious Jones, who is studying for the GED in hopes of becoming completely independent from public assistance benefits and her abusive mother, Mary Jones. Precious reveals how paradoxical visuality is for black women, as her presumably large size makes her hyper-visible. Yet the generational poverty she inherits, along with her eventual HIV diagnosis, all allude to stereotypes of black youth in the 1980s that erase her individual subjecthood, making her illegible in contrast to the white heteronormative subject.

Precious's thoughts about her failures, and the cultural perceptions of her as a young unwed mother, reveal that what's at the heart of the tension between hypervisibility and invisibility is a kill-or-cure mentality in which presumably dysfunctional black women must be rehabilitated for the sake of menial service to the center or violently erased. The kill-or-cure binary is a term coined by Jay Dolmage that speaks to the incredibly high stakes in some popular representations of disability. According to this myth, a character's disability must be cured by some miraculous feat of the protagonist, thus redeeming them as the hero, or if cure is impossible, the character must be sacrificed (Dolmage 39). Dolmage exclusively connected this term to disability, but I find that it also applies to deviant black women. Just as Dolmage highlights society's complete intolerance for disability, for women like Precious, there is zero tolerance for physical or

intellectual variation from the average. Black women who can't become Strong Black Women and work in order to provide the conveniences and comforts for the center, must be cured of these differences, face a literal death, carceral punishment or at best a social death, existing in the margins and contending with the tensions of erasure and hyper-visibility.

Because Precious's major goal is to earn her GED, the state-wide standardized tests that she must take to reach this milestone function as a source of conflict. To her, the tests not only reflect her intelligence, but also serve as a policing tool that measures the extent you can be a productive citizen, symbolizing her value. Constantly failing the tests demonstrates to Precious that not only is she performing below the minimum standard, but that she also can't be integrated into society. And she therefore must continue to be invisible and dependent on the welfare system. After failing another standardized test, she finds herself in a dejected state and marvels, "I big, I talk, I eats, I cooks, I laugh, watch TV, do what my muver say. But I can see when the picture come back I don't exist. Don't nobody want me. Don't nobody need me. I know who I am. I know who they say I am—vampire sucking the system's blood. Ugly black grease to be wipe away, punish, kilt, changed, finded a job for" (Sapphire 31). Failing the test, being overweight, black, and a woman all violently overdetermine Precious's bodymind. On the one hand, Precious's feelings of invisibility connect to the ways that black women like herself become not only unreadable, but like the vampire figure—a despised villain in mainstream society. Even though Precious is illiterate, the pressure she puts on herself to perform, and the social intolerance for her failure all demonstrate that black women, regardless of impairment, must produce labor at all costs. They don't get a pass like their white counterparts. It's important to note that illiteracy, obesity, and any other physical or intellectual differences from what's considered average that make the performance of work for the center implausible or difficult, as

is the case with Precious in this moment, are intolerable and I consider them an impairment because of the difficulties they create and the social stigma attached to them.

On the other hand, Precious's self-imagining as a "vampire sucking the system's blood" also alludes to the long-standing demonization of single black mothers as proverbial "welfare queens" or leeches, who conceive recklessly and take advantage of government assistance programs. Much has been written about the representation of black mothers as welfare queens. Many scholars and critics trace the demonization of welfare recipients back to already existent stereotypes about black women. Ange-Marie Hancock writes that what underlies this vitriol isn't only the intersection of racism and sexism, but a "politics of disgust" (9). According to Hancock, the politics of disgust is an active "perception, interpretation, and manipulation" of public perception in order to gather support of policy that limits welfare recipients' rights (4). The politics of disgust is not just "contempt or demonization," but it's a collective effort amongst politicians to view welfare recipients as overwhelmingly black and women, and therefore different from American citizens who are deserving of government aid (6). Black women are represented as repulsive or "disgusting" because of their assumed inability to live up to the ideals of American nationhood, notably the cultural capital of working regularly. The politics of disgust speaks to Precious's depiction of herself as a monstrous vampire. Holloway Sparks further notes that women who receive public assistance are consistently divided into two ends of an oversimplified binary that functions to validate conservative welfare reform-- the welfare queen that I previously mentioned, who is only "out to cheat taxpayers and…irresponsible teenage girls bearing children out of wedlock" and "'model mothers whose compliance with the new welfare regime meant they could leave the welfare rolls, provide better lives for their children, and become "respectable" citizens" (172).

We can ultimately trace the origins of the welfare queen to texts like Daniel Patrick Moynihan's, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action (*1965).[12] Commonly referred to as "The Moynihan Report," this document sought to identify major causes for the poverty crisis in the African American community. Instead of exposing structural causes, the report concluded that households headed by single black mothers bore the burden of blame for dysfunction in black America. Thus, texts like the Moynihan Report not only stigmatized black motherhood as deviant, but it validated the false narrative that single black mothers choose to manipulate the collective instead of participate in romanticized narratives of nationhood like rugged individualism, therefore making them problematically un-American. Documents like the Moynihan Report are evidence of the long-standing misogynoir to which single black mothers have been subjected. My objective in this chapter is to complicate this discourse on the welfare queen by examining the unspoken ideal that justifies the demonization of black mothers receiving public assistance—the Strong Black Woman. Historically, the Strong Black Woman is championed as a positive representation of black womanhood, but in praxis, characters like Precious are not only demonized like their real-life counterparts because of misogynoir, but, as I will argue, because of their inability to assume the role of the Strong Black Woman. Thus, the poor test scores she earns are so paramount to her sense of being because they suggest, in ableist terms, Precious's lack of intelligence. More importantly, the scores imply that she can't be incorporated into society as a productive, laboring citizen as the Strong Black Woman dictates.

[12] *The Moynihan Report* was a sociology study carried out during Lyndon B. Johnson's presidency that claimed to focus on locating the causes of African American poverty.

The swift way that black women like Precious become antagonists to the general U.S. population reveals the widespread intolerance for unproductive black disability. I use the phrase "unproductive black disability" rather than the broad category of "black disability" because black subjects with impairment are completely socially tolerable as long as their impairment doesn't hinder them from productivity. But Sarah Orem defines these women who can't or refuse to produce labor as "bad" disabled black women "not fulfilling [their] proper role as the backbone of American labor…[which] inevitably turns into a story about a black woman whose actions are unfathomable and unthinkable" (181). Orem doesn't explicitly use the phrase "Strong Black Woman," but this is the unspoken standard here that counters "bad disabled black women." Non-normative black female characters are expected to work at a level of parity with the able-bodied Strong Black Woman. If variant black female characters can't expend their bodyminds in work, they become illegible or invisible as Precious articulates. In effect, black women like Precious who can't be a Strong Black Woman become vampires, monsters, and overall problems to society that must be rehabilitated at all costs.

I begin this chapter with Precious's metaphor about feeling like a vampire because it taps into racialized rhetoric about black mothers, but more interestingly highlights an intersection between the grotesque and black female excess that is under-theorized in African American literature. Precious's comparison of herself to vampires certainly echoes the stereotype of the welfare queen, but her reference to the classic gothic creature draws out nuances in the representation of black mothers that haven't thoroughly been considered. Her metaphor suggests that the welfare queen is not only perceived as deviant, but can also be provocatively terrifying and erotic. Like the vampire, who is so feared because of their ability to infect and transform virtually anyone into a monster like themselves, the assumed lazy opportunism of the single

black mother, in an ableist sense, makes her a feared body of contagion that can somehow infect an earnest, hardworking white American society with her self-indulgent opportunism. Not only does the welfare queen's failure to be a productive citizen make her deviant in a society that values work as a person's defining character quality, but the way she uses sex to financially 'trap' suitors in a similar fashion to the vampire's predatory behavior defies gender roles of propriety.

While the vampire and the welfare queen are hated figures, the amoral, grotesque space they occupy, where normative codes of gender and sexuality are obsolete, presents potential freedoms for black women that I call *grotesque strength*. *Grotesque strength* is a subversive quality that is both physical and spiritual, and it can be found in black female characters with visible markers of difference, including amputated limbs, obesity, scars, and birthmarks, to name a few. It's imperative to point out that I don't use the term "grotesque" in the pejorative sense as something or someone that is "monstrous" or "ugly." Doing so would reduce the term to an aesthetic category. Rather, my intention is to reclaim the word grotesque for its disruptive potential in frustrating expectations of normativity. In this chapter, I consider all physical characteristics that deviate from the normative body a disability in a social, rather than a medical context. In other words, what all these characteristics have in common isn't the urgency of medical intervention: it's that communities stigmatize these qualities as different from the normative, and therefore inherently bad—something to fear, despise, and even eradicate. Therefore, the root of the issue with grotesque bodyminds isn't the need for a medical cure, but rather the negative social meaning attached to these conditions. Often, these signs of bodily variation don't dramatically affect the health and quality of life for characters who possess them. Even when these physical impairments are inconsequential, ableism labels these characteristics

deficient and unappealing. Therefore, grotesque strength is just as much about the implications of watching (who has the privilege to watch whom), more specifically the outsiders who stare and project meaning onto black female bodyminds, as it is about the black female characters themselves.

The "strength" of grotesque strength aligns with many of the conventional characteristics of the Strong Black Woman, such as survivalism and independence. While the Strong Black Woman is defined by her ability to conquer adversity and inspire observers, grotesque characters show strength amidst failure and even at times impending death. Grotesque strength strips the Strong Black Woman of her impulse towards dogged perseverance and reveals the fallacies buried within these cultural expectations of black women. It also allows marginalized subjects to trouble the value systems that attempt to define and restrict them.

Thus, disability studies at times falls short of considering how grotesque rhetoric affects black disabled subjects, and black feminist theory focuses on black grotesque embodiment often in terms of gender and sexuality. In using the phrase grotesque strength, I juxtapose popular terms from black feminist theory and disability studies in order to join the two fields in conversation with one another. Black feminist theory on the one hand, articulates characters' unique positioning at the intersection of race and gender, which disability studies so often overlooks. On the other hand, disability studies' decentering of normativity takes grotesquerie out of its ableist context, which black feminist theory in the past hasn't questioned. Grotesque strength attempts to bridge the gap between the two fields and strip grotesquerie of its degrading connotations.

In this chapter, I situate analysis of *Push* with Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973), which follows the titular character as she grows up in the segregated town of the Bottom, leaves for

college, and travels the world only to return home after finding no opportunities of advancement. I place these two texts in conversation because both depict grotesque characters facing great hardship who upset reader expectations for a strong black female character who miraculously conquers subjugation. Readers find Sula at the novel's conclusion near death and alone in her family home, after driving away the boarders and her dearest friend, Nel. While loneliness shouldn't be understood as innately negative, it's a particularly devastating sign of failure for Sula because her most important, actualizing relationship in the novel is her sisterhood with Nel. Precious is in a similarly circumscribed position at the end of *Push* with no meaningful job prospects, facing death with HIV. In comparing the trajectory of Precious and Sula's character arcs to that of Sula's grandmother, Eva Peace, it will become apparent that Precious' and Sula's emphasis on idealized rebellion leads to their demise, in contrast to Eva's relative flourishing as an anti-hero. Ultimately, through character and plot analysis of Precious and Sula, I will argue that the critical black feminist voices Sula and Precious craft aren't enough to liberate them from their marginalized positions. Ultimately, Eva's ability to build a community of her own is the fully actualized potential of grotesque strength that Sula and Precious are unable to accomplish. Taken together, *Push* and *Sula* reveal how grotesque characters, no matter how seemingly normative, in the case of the titular character Sula, or deviant, in the case of Precious, are frequently unable to grow beyond the limited circumstances they're born into and maximize their potential, as linear narratives of success would suggest. The way that *Sula* and *Push* question, re-shape, and even cast off unquestioned presumptions about the use of respectability as a pathway to success and black women's role as caregivers in their communities, is ultimately the potential of grotesque strength. Throughout this chapter, I will include scholars from disability studies and black feminist theory, like Chenequa Walker-Barnes and Dennis Tyler, to theorize the

connections between black grotesquerie and political dynamics of (in)visibility. Analysis of *Sula* and *Push* will demonstrate that grotesque theory is worth embracing as a critical and interpretive lens because it troubles the naturalized boundaries of normativity and deviance, and failure and success, offering black female characters, authors, and critics a way out of hegemonic structures.

II.

Since grotesque strength modifies Bakhtin's grotesquerie, I want to briefly outline the origins of the latter. By gesturing towards the ways the application of this theory has overlooked disabled, black subjects I hope to demonstrate the timeliness of grotesque strength. The core of Bakhtinian grotesquerie is carnival, which is essentially "a mode of sociality that undermines and parodies established sociopolitical systems. The grotesque is a process of revaluing and repositioning the debased elements of bodily, structural, conceptual, and worldly configurations" (Abdur-Rahman 684). Bakhtin theorized that European, Medieval-era carnivals were the breeding ground for the grotesque, as they were spaces in which the debased instincts of the body were given the privilege of social power in the shallowest sense of the term.[13] Thus, the grotesque emerges out of this collapse of reason and celebration of all debased forms as both positive and negative, destructive and regenerative (684).

The literary grotesque translates the chaos of carnival into pointed social commentary that questions naturalized hierarchies and binaries (i.e. material vs. textual or moral vs. immoral), eliminating heterogeneity, while at the same time refusing to promote homogeneity. Geoffrey Galt Harpham acknowledges that the grotesque blurs categories and "stand[s] at the margin of

[13] It's important to note that movements like European Enlightenment separated the body and the mind as two separate and opposed entities. In this binary, the mind (associated with reason, rationale, and objectivity) was thought to be superior to the body (associated with crude emotions, waste, and presumably sinful lust).

consciousness between the known and the unknown, the perceived and the unperceived, calling into question the adequacy of our ways of organizing the world, of dividing the continuum of experience into knowable parts" (qtd in Garland-Thomson 112-113). Because the grotesque figure embodies liminality and obscures the accepted boundaries of ethics and ontology, their illegibility, in a reason-centered society, becomes an asset rather than a setback. Their mere existence draws critical attention to the accepted ways of viewing society.

Although grotesquerie provocatively challenges social norms, race, a treasure trove for false divides and accepted myths, hasn't been a part of the discourse as much as it should. The way that racist discourse has commonly labeled black subjects inferior to their white counterparts because of presumed grotesquerie is a pivotal intersection that is worth exploring to not only better understand the negative ramifications of the grotesque, but the ways it can be used as a discursive tool. Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman is one such scholar doing this important work as her concept, "black grotesquerie" crosses Bakhtinian grotesquerie with the black experience. She writes that black grotesquerie "discomfits the world, disarranging and reforming the official order of things… reflect[ing] black political desire for 'something for which there is no coherent articulation'" (684). Black grotesquerie is a kind of afro-futurism that does away with the abject racial dynamics of chattel slavery, but also negates the misconception that the future is always a drastic improvement on the past. Instead, the past, the present, and the future for black people consists of "undocumented spaces of freedom, the barest repair, and private joy in the continuous, catastrophic present" (685). I include Abdur-Rahman's theoretical work to validate that grotesquerie can in fact parallel the black experience. Her exploration of the grotesque additionally challenges the predominance of realism in the field of African American literature, demonstrating the potential of this concept for critics and authors alike. However, while Abdur-

Rahman uses grotesquerie in abstract terms as a tool to shape the future, her work overlooks the lived experiences of non-normative black people who are perceived as grotesque, which grotesque strength places at the forefront.

Trudier Harris, in her pivotal *Saints, Sinners, Saviors: Strong Black Women in African American Literature* (2001) focuses on the popularity of the Strong Black Woman as one of the greatest missteps in African American literature. She criticizes the veneration of the Strong Black Woman in African American literature, and contends that the "process of ascribing attributes to one's self that are usually identified with another gender [in this case the masculinization of black women] in and of itself reflects a problematic conception of the self" at best, and a "virus of disease" at worst (Harris 13-17). According to Harris, this trope is so dangerous to both the black community and the field of African American literature because it disrupts the naturalized gender roles upheld in Western society. Within the context of the early 1990s, Harris's points were groundbreaking. However, since the publication of *Saints and Sinners,* scholarship has surpassed this binary paradigm of gender. I include Harris's commentary here not only because her work is pivotal to any discussion of the Strong Black Woman, but also because I want to examine the nuances of what she highlights as problematic about the trope. Harris notes that the Strong Black Woman's subversive gender-bending is one of the many problems with the trope, whereas I view this inversion of social norms as the redemptive potential of the grotesque. Instead of abandoning black female grotesquerie because of its presumed deviance, grotesquerie can reveal the underlying values and tensions in the construction of norms and the way racism, sexism, and ableism all intersect to mark black women's bodies.

The language of grotesquerie has historically been a source of dehumanization for black women. The boundary between black female strength and grotesquerie is incredibly shallow, as excess strength quickly becomes interpreted as masculine and is therefore policed as unnatural and grotesque. Although my focus on strength and grotesquerie is relatively under-theorized, historically, black feminists have discussed the stakes of black female embodiment and the policing of black women's bodyminds as grotesque without explicitly using the language of this theory. One such example is Hortense Spillers' concept of fleshiness, which articulates the embodied debauchery of carnival without using such terms. Fleshiness affirms essentialist beliefs about the black female bodymind that grotesquerie attempts to overturn. Spillers originally coined the term to refer to the "state of sexual availability and use…having one's body located 'as the preeminent site of racial-sexual difference" (qtd in Nash 32). Fleshiness is a process, by which, black women's bodyminds are constructed as excessively erotic and in direct opposition to the presumed chastity of white womanhood. This false binary allows for the reduction of black women to literal flesh that is devoid of humanity and made for pleasure, indulgence and the many pleasures of the grotesque.

Nicole R. Fleetwood further complicates fleshiness, arguing that the process of making black women into the binary opposite of their white counterparts is reinforced by the notion of black bodyminds as excess flesh. Excess flesh "attend[s] to the ways that black female corporeality is rendered as an excessive overdetermination and as overdetermined excess" (Fleetwood 21). Excess flesh, in many regards, is wedded to essentialism. The presumed spectacle of the black female bodymind not only transforms black women into oddities, but it's supposed to indicate internal anomalies, like a masculinized sense of sexuality. The grotesque seems to underlie this discourse around black female embodiment because concepts like

fleshiness and excess flesh aren't just a matter of harmless aesthetic preference. They reflect a concerted effort to mark black women's bodyminds as innately non-normative, as opposed to white women, and therefore freakish.[14] The depiction of black women as hyper-sexualized is informed by these connotations of abnormality, and this freakishness in turn, further racializes them. Black feminist critics are right to draw attention to the ways that black women's bodyminds are racialized and sexualized, as well as the stakes of this signification. However, (non)normativity is a value system that black women are defined against, and it underlies the way that they've been made to be the Other. Ultimately, a conversation about black female embodiment is incomplete if it stops at just race and sex. Grotesquerie can provide critics with the language needed to articulate the Othering of race and sex, and also offer black characters a way out of the overdetermined victimization of black feminist theory.

Just as black feminist theorists have discussed the cultural implications of (non)normativity, but have largely focused on race and sex, disability studies scholars have discussed grotesquerie extensively, but they haven't substantially examined its parallels with blackness. I briefly gesture towards an essay on the 2012 Paralympics to illustrate the ways that disability studies scholars unintentionally overlook black subjects in their examination of the grotesque. In this essay, Karin Harrasser explores the "supercrip" (a figure I will examine in chapter 3) branding of the 2012 Paralympic Games and argues that the fetishization of athletes as "'grotesque' spectacles" (181) can be resolved by unifying the Paralympics and the Olympics.

[14] Sarah Bartmann is a major example of the racialization and enfreakment of black female bodyminds. Her presumably large buttocks, advertised by circus handlers and race scientists alike as a deformity was displayed as a signifier of both her exoticized blackness and her feared beastliness. Bartmann, as scholars have already noted, informs the ways black women and their bodyminds are represented as both wildly uncontrollable, and also made for pleasure and consumption.

According to her, keeping the two spaces separate enables "the market and sports [*sic*] [to] hide the inequality of their basic assumptions by way of fictions of equality and equivalence" (183). Harrasser's solution rightly demonstrates how equality and diversity become mere lip service in neoliberal spaces rather than aggressive organizational change. However, to highlight integration as the central issue with the Paralympics completely overlooks the problems with the organization's frontloading of whiteness as a centerpiece in its marketing. Additionally, practical matters like training costs and access to disability sports programs mean that working class, disabled people of color are often economically unable to participate in the Paralympics.[15] With this disparity in mind, Harrasser's claims of organizational segregation and grotesque exoticization rely on racialized rhetoric, while unintentionally disenfranchising people of color all over again.

While these characters actively trouble the boundaries of normativity, they are also on the receiving end of probing stares and glances from outsiders that constantly reiterate their grotesqueness. Like the grotesque, the dynamics and stakes of being watched is another topic that both feminist studies and disability studies have theorized. The concepts that have come out of these conversations, notably, the feminist notion of the gaze and the disability studies concept of the stare, are frequently understood as separate realities for women and disabled people. However, because the women in *Push* and *Sula* are raced, gendered, and disabled, the two concepts work hand in hand to Otherize the grotesque body. To briefly explain these two ideas, Laura Mulvey's gaze acknowledges the ways that men and women are placed in a dichotomous power dynamic in which the man is often the spectator, watching and reducing the woman to an

[15] For further discussion of class issues in the Paralympics, see Thompson.

eroticized object. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's concept of the stare, in turn, theorizes the male gaze in a disability studies context. Where the gaze transforms women into sexual play-things, the stare reduces disabled subjects to objectified "freaks." The stare is all about making cognitive sense of the visual surprise of the disabled bodymind. According to Garland-Thomson, the act of staring builds knowledge and makes "sense of the unexpected, the disabled body…These are bodies that we expect neither to see, to know, nor to have. Such stareable sights capture our eyes and demand a narrative that puts our just-disrupted world back in order" (38). Disabled subjects are so shocking to the able-bodied spectator because they challenge the fantasy of the bodymind's stability, and prove that basing self-worth on physical ideals can be preposterous. The irony that I locate in Garland-Thomson's stare is that there's always an opportunity in this moment to acknowledge disability as an aspect of the human experience. However, in praxis, the stare is a moment in which the divide between the able-bodied spectator and the disabled subject is doubled. The stare maintains the fantasy of distance between the disabled as individualized tragedies and the spectator who has miraculously been spared this fate.

Black feminist scholars have similarly explored how the act of looking polices black women. Notable examples of this theoretical work include Patricia Hill Collins' controlling images[16] and bell hooks' oppositional gaze.[17] Fleetwood identifies victimization as a re-occurring theme in critical work on blackness and visuality as "the visual sphere has been understood… as a punitive field—the scene of punishment—in which subjugation of blacks continues through the reproduction of denigrating racial stereotypes that whites define themselves through the process of 'negative differentiation'" (13). Where the gaze and the stare

[16] For a definition of controlling images, see Collins 69.
[17] For a definition of the oppositional gaze, see hooks 122.

give white women and white disabled subjects the disruptive potential to reverse an objectifying look back onto the spectator, based off work from Collins and hooks, I see visuality within the mainstream as a rhetorical dead-end for black women because regardless of whether or not they look back, white viewers and image-makers will perpetually reduce them to stereotypes. No amount of looking back can reverse the extensive degradation that has come to define black women. Therefore, if being a spectacle in the center offers no alternatives, these theorists assert that black women should venture out of the center and produce art that speaks to their experiences. I find the grotesque characters in *Push* and *Sula* in similar dynamics to what scholars across fields have already theorized. As illustrated by the imagining of the welfare queen as a vampire, I will argue that Precious, Sula and her grandmother Eva can provide new insight into the ramifications of visuality for black women as I see them at the center of both the stare and the gaze. These characters are watched for the sake of being Otherized as different and eroticized, just as the vampire is a creature who is both feared as a monster and desired as an erotically alluring creature.

I will explore this process of watching in the next two sections, and the extent to which communities in *Push* and *Sula* use their gaze to police the protagonists. Some of the guiding questions for this chapter include: How does grotesquerie in *Push* and *Sula* complicate our understandings of racialization and sexualization? How does grotesquerie complicate or modify the Strong Black Woman? To what extent does race change the implications of the gaze? How does disability complicate black feminist discourse on black women as spectacles? And to what extent does each character harness grotesque strength in order to disrupt this policing surveillance? In this chapter I will draw parallels and distinctions between the white stare that readily shapes Precious into a problem body, and the collective black stare of the Bottom that

attempts to police and contain the deviant black feminism of Sula and Eva. Then I will consider the ways that grotesque strength both modifies the tradition of the Strong Black Woman, and exposes its limitations, especially in regards to the privileging of the overcoming narrative. In the last section, I will shift from considering how these characters push against the policing surveillance in their communities to the disruptive potential of their failures to do so. I frame this section around Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011). Halberstam shows the fallacies in conventional understandings of success as an objective social phenomenon resulting from individual agency. Halberstam instead asserts that success is tied up with heteronormative marriage and reproduction. In this regard, if success is bound to patriarchal institutions, according to Halberstam, failure should be embraced rather than feared as a way out of compulsory heteronormativity. Halberstam's concept of failure, to an extent, parallels the grotesque as it presents an inverted value system in which failure is positive and productive, and success is oppressive. According to Halberstam, "failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods... Failure preserves some of the anarchy of childhood and disturbs the supposedly clean boundaries between adults and children, winners and losers" (3). If conventional success reinforces the institutions that perpetuate the dogma of normalcy, then failure offers an alternative from this cyclical normativity. This inversion troubles naturalized assumptions about success as impartial and reveals how success is a reflection of implicit societal values. By incorporating Halberstam, I want to further complicate his commentary and note that one's access to gendered success is greatly informed by class and race, specifically one's proximity to white privilege. In this closing section I argue that when we compare the character arcs of Sula, Precious, and Eva, if failure for Halberstam is the avoidance of

reinforcing patriarchy, then failure for these black women is avoiding the demands of black respectability and white hegemony by performing grotesque strength.

III.

Of the three characters I analyze, Precious is the most physically stigmatized, as she has several visible and invisible markers of difference including HIV and obesity. Many scholars and film critics attacked *Push* and the 2009 film adaptation, *Precious*, arguing that the incestuous abuse she suffered, and her many disabilities were implausible and even exaggerated for emotional appeal. In summarizing this criticism, Michelle Jarman writes that "the representation of Precious herself as an illiterate, "obese," HIV-positive teenage mother of two, while admittedly highlighting her victimization, has also been seen by some critics as perniciously re-inscribing negative racial and gender stereotypes" (164). Certainly, the list of characteristics that make Precious different from the normative are extensive. And, as mentioned in the introduction, Precious vocalizes her own awareness of people's perceptions of her as a stereotype. While Precious may seem like an extreme, even unrealistically subjugated character, Sapphire has noted in interviews that "she encountered girls like Precious while teaching — overweight girls who didn't fit into the confines of our society's beauty paradigm…I wanted to show that this girl is locked out through literacy. She's locked out by her physical appearance. She's locked out by her class, and she's locked out by her color" (Sapphire). The skepticism around Precious and the way that her humanity is unreadable only reinforces the importance of *Push* as a text that showcases the experiences of the overlooked in society. Furthermore, what spares Precious from being a caricature of inner-city youth is the contextualization of her subjugation and her disability. *Push* is just as much about the circumstances that make Precious a grotesque bodymind, as it is about her pursuit of independence. Readers can trace each of Precious's

differences to some form of structural inequality or abuse. For instance, the sexual abuse she endures at the hands of her father, eventually causes her HIV diagnosis. And the generational poverty she faces, makes a healthier lifestyle impractical, and her obesity unavoidable. Thus, critics' dismissal of Precious as stereotypical misses the point of *Push* entirely. Sapphire's contextualization shifts this character from a potential stereotype, to a fully fleshed out character, while holding society accountable for the real women whose lives resemble that of Precious. Precious is not necessarily a figure of idyllic, accomplished blackness, but Sapphire's intention isn't for *Push* to be propaganda. *Push* takes a look at the underbelly of society, and in the tradition of the grotesque, forces readers to reconcile with the ugliness of social inequality that produces someone like Precious.

Push not only holds readers accountable for the ways that society has failed young black girls, but it engages in a much-needed criticism of authoritative figures like black matriarchs. Rather than comfort and care for Precious, her mother, Mary, is a villainous character and a source of fear for Precious. Throughout *Push*, Mary is portrayed as a physically grotesque figure. In One of the few descriptions of Mary, Precious describes her as a visual oddity, "big, dark…she got pussy odor and ugly brogan shoes like people make fun of and giant green dress that her legs come out of like black jelly elephant legs" (Sapphire 84-85). In addition to Mary's physical appearance, the verbal abuse she exacts against Precious is equally grotesque. Mary constantly betrays readers' expectations for a nurturing black mother because often if she isn't physically abusing Precious, she is hurling insults at her. In one instance, when she finds out that Precious has been impregnated by her lover, and Precious's father, Carl, Mary violently yells at her and calls her a "'slut! Goddam slut! You fuckin' cow! I don't believe this, right under my nose. You been high tailing it round here.' Pain hit me again, then she hit me. I'm on the floor

groaning, 'Mommy please'" (Sapphire 9). Rather than protect Precious as her daughter, Mary tragically and grotesquely misinterprets the abuse, from the perspective of a scorned lover, viewing Precious as competition for Carl's affection, and not a victim. Mary exhibits all the formidability of a black matriarch, but with no compassion to provide a sense of balance, she becomes a figure that is monstrous to the point of becoming cartoonish. Although she strikes terror in Precious, in public, Mary is a source of ridicule for others, suggesting that Precious' perception of the villainous characters around her is somewhat unreliable and subjective. In part, Precious's subjectivity as the narrator is part of the reason why she is a fully fleshed out character and Mary is not. Because *Push* is told from Precious's perspective, readers solely have access to her inner world—her dreams, her fears, and her background. And in turn, the depravity of characters around her who torment her, is almost inflated to the point of being a caricature. Essentially, the most monstrous thing about Mary is her iteration of an angry black woman. Thus, when we factor in authorial intention, it's possible that Mary is also a rather flat character for the sake of demonstrating how harmful and ugly one-dimensional stereotypes of black women are in their denial of emotional complexity. The difference in narrative treatment, the way that Precious is actualized, humanizes and challenges the politics of disgust that dictates representations of single black mothers. And the wickedness of Mary does the necessary work of disenchanting readers and divorcing them from the collective fondness of an idealized black matriarchy. Mary proves that the collective love of idyllic black matriarchs allows this stereotype to go unchecked and morph into something monstrous.

Despite Mary's maliciousness, Precious comes to identify her mother within herself. The moment Precious finds out that she is HIV positive illustrates this pivotal shift in awareness. She notes, ""I look Mama and see my face, my body, my color…No matter how fly my braids

is…this is my mother. Mama don't look me in eye. She never did 'less she was shouting on me or telling me what to do…She look down say, 'Your daddy dead…Carl had the AIDS virus'" (84-85). While Precious and Mary appear to be foil characters of one another, the way that Precious literally sees herself in her mother seems to suggest that Mary is perhaps a doppelganger to Precious, rather than a foil character. Despite the many instances throughout the novel in which Precious situates herself at the center of her own fantasies about idealized white beauty, Mary represents the sobering reality of her marginalized existence and the grotesquerie of her past that she is bound to. Precious's observations about the parallels between herself and Mary complicate what would otherwise be a portrayal of her mother as a villain. The emphasis on creating complicated, human characters was a stated goal of Sapphire's as she mentions that her intention with Mary was to destroy "the strong, African American mother figure" and show that "as horrible as Mama is, she's a human being. And because humanness includes monstrous deformations of character, we as African Americans are not exempt from the worst" (37-38). The fact that Sapphire explicitly uses the term "monstrous" to describe her characters affirms my understanding of grotesque strength as a conscious theme and characterization in *Push*. If Precious is a strong grotesque character who suffers physical and mental anguish and strives for better, than Mary is a vindictive matriarch who uses her strength to dehumanize those around her. But not only can disenfranchised characters like Mary oppress others, often, they were once victims as well. Despite Mary's repulsive behavior, after Precious discovers she's HIV positive, readers find out that Mary was raped and victimized at a young age like her. Mary's background on the one hand, illustrates the cyclical nature of abuse—that the victimized often proceed to prey upon others. On the other hand, the fact that like Precious, Mary has a history of sexual abuse (it's mentioned that Carl was engaged in the statutory rape of Mary when she was a

minor), also suggests that Precious, as an amiable protagonist, may repeat the history of her mother and become a villain to her children as well.

In contrast to Sula and Eva, Precious's size most closely parallels the robust body of the Strong Black Woman. While the fat Strong Black Woman uses her bodymind to soothe others, the romanticizing of her larger bodymind diverts attention away from the seriousness of obesity as a medical problem and the socioeconomic circumstances that make these health issues prominent for black women. Scholars like Chanequa Walker-Barnes have identified the presumably excessive weight of the Strong Black Woman, and a number of other conditions that black women face, as part and parcel of the larger narrative of black female suffering. For Walker-Barnes, issues like obesity demonstrate that the "StrongBlackWoman" can "withstand suffering without complaint…The symptoms of some physical and mental health disorders have become so widespread among Black women that they are no longer noticed or viewed as pathological. Instead, they are viewed as normative" (43). The fat Strong Black Woman is an inherently contradictory body. On the one hand, she is expected to possess exemplary mental and physical strength. On the other hand, she performs this strength amidst disability and chronic illness. Despite impairment, that would make any other individual vulnerable, she is expected to perform as if her impairment doesn't exist and be resilient against all odds.

While the Strong Black Woman's larger bodymind connotes security and maternalistic authority, Precious demonstrates that when a black child is overweight, they aren't associated with maternal comfort and are instead demonized. By contrast, because of Precious's weight and race, people are either unable or refuse to see her as the sixteen-year-old child that she is. She describes herself as being overweight throughout her youth, and "heavy at twelve too, nobody get I'm twelve 'less I tell them. I'm tall. I jus' know I'm over two hundred 'cause the needle on

the scale in the bathroom stop there it don't can go no further. Last time they want to weigh me at school I say no. Why for, I know I'm fat. So what. Next topic for the day" (Sapphire 11). Several research studies and articles have discussed the ways that black children are perceived as being older than what they are, and therefore unable to be children.[18] However, in addition to race, Precious's weight ages her and makes her imperceptible in spaces like school where she should be protected and nurtured as a child. She becomes a deviant bodymind to monitor, quantify, and rehabilitate, to which Precious refuses to cooperate.

Anna Mollow draws out further complications with race and weight and suggests that obesity both reinforces and contradicts the cultural perceptions of black invulnerability. Mollow contends that fat blackness creates "a double bind in which black people are depicted as unvictimizable for two contradictory reasons: black people—of all sizes, but fat black people in particular—are figured as innately disabled but also as invulnerable to disability, injury, or suffering" (105). Fatness further complicates the racist reception of blackness as an ever-present threat to society. Because of anti-fat stigma, obesity is quickly read as a disability. Just as black people's presumed proclivity for strength and survival deflects from structural inequalities, obesity is often linked to black suffering and even death while conveniently letting structural inequity off the hook. In other words, because black people are naturally supposed to be strong and able to survive any circumstances, the pressure is put on the individual to survive unequal circumstances, not on the structures that create these unequal divides. Similarly, when black death is publicly and popularly attributed to obesity without an explanation of the factors that go into this health disparity like food deserts in inner cities and lack of access to fresh produce or

[18] For further discussion on social perceptions of black children, see Epstein et al.

literature on healthy eating, obesity becomes the fault of the individual, and their own assumed decision to eat in excess. Thus, when a subject is both overweight and black, because of the perception of blackness as excessively tough, the understanding of obesity as disability isn't extended to them, and they're stripped of any fragility that comprises victimhood. I would add that black people are not only unvictimizable as Mollow asserts, but the intersection of race and fatness makes them inherently imperfect victims. In addition to disability, when fatness intersects on a black bodymind it exacerbates the perceived intimidation of blackness. In other words, when you're fat and black, you're perceived as a bigger threat. And, as we have seen in current events with black victims being slain by the police force, fat black people often pay their lives for the cost of white fear.

In connection to Mollow's rationale behind fat blackness, white stewards view Precious as inherently disabled. However, when we examine her interactions with the State, what seems to underlie the apathy towards Precious's abuse is a belief in her inability to be a fragile victim, and not an invulnerability to disability as Mollow's theory would suggest. As a cog in the machine of the public welfare system, Precious's subjecthood is non-existent. She is reduced to test scores and case files that determine her access to resources.[19] Yet generational poverty places her in the precarious position of having to depend on a system that views her as inconsequential. The bureaucratic State, and all the extensions of its power (school, standardized, tests, social workers), stand in as a major voyeuristic body in *Push* that monitors her every move. But instead of intervening and protecting Precious when it's discovered that she's pregnant, the State takes

[19] The case files that her social worker Ms. Weiss drafts document all the trauma that Precious has endured and her progress in school. The case files come to symbolize the unequal power dynamic between Precious and the State as the latter watches and controls her life, and readily defines her as dysfunctional.

the form of white stewards who project their judgmental gaze upon her. One example of how the State grossly fails Precious is her high school principal, Mrs. Lichenstein. When Precious meets with Mrs. Lichenstein to discuss the issue of her second pregnancy, she notices Mrs. Lichenstein "staring at me, from behind her big wooden desk, she got her white bitch hands folded together on top her desk" (Sapphire 6). This first appearance that Precious draws up of Mrs. Lichenstein is almost a stereotypical caricature of white authority. While Precious maintains an inner monologue that is brash, outspoken, and even angry, Mrs. Lichenstein's body language ("hands [politely] folded") in contrast, depicts her as a distant, emotionless figure. Mrs. Lichenstein leers at her from a position of absolute authority. Even her desk symbolizes the tremendous agency she has over a helpless Precious as a paper-pusher in the system. Completely unaware of or unconcerned with Precious's history of sexual abuse, Mrs. Lichenstein looks at Precious with disdainful judgment, as if she's a freak for being pregnant as a teenager.

This binary Precious draws between herself and Mrs. Lichenstein is a somewhat crude illustration of authority that reflects Precious's own simplistic understanding of how power operates along racial lines. Nonetheless, Mrs. Lichenstein's cold stare powerfully symbolizes how the State Otherizes black women. Instead of checking into Precious's welfare, Mrs. Lichenstein targets her with a look that unsettles and alienates Precious. In this instance, something as interpersonal as a look only shores up the divide between Mrs. Lichenstein and Precious as state authority and vulnerable citizen. Furthermore, Sapphire's depiction of Mrs. Lichenstein as uncaring could be a critique of mainstream white feminism. Mrs. Lichenstein's apathy highlights the limitations of white feminism, and their inability to identify the struggles black women like Precious face at the intersections of race, class, and ableism as women's rights issues.

In the grotesque fashion of reflecting back to readers the values of the times, we can attribute Precious's vocalized hatred of white authority figures like Mrs. Lichenstein to her parroting of black separatism. Precious even refers to Minister Louis Farrakhan, the face of 1980s and 1990s black separatism, as one of her idols. She notes that a part of her daily routine is waking up and seeing a "picture of Farrakhan's face on the wall. I love him. He is against crack addicts and crackers. Crackers is the cause of everything bad. It why my father ack like he do" (34). Precious's animosity towards whiteness should come as no surprise considering that around the 1980s when the novel takes place, male-oriented pro-black movements, reminiscent of the 1960s Black Panther Party, were popular amongst African American communities. A movement like black separatism has inherent value for Precious because it gives a character as marginalized as she is a sense of pride and more importantly the language, however flawed and limited, to articulate what's inexpressible—the incestuous abuse her father puts her through. The problem with attributing her father's abuse to 'Crackers' or whiteness is that it suggests black men are incapable of abusing women unless they have been influenced by presumably backwards white culture. This rhetorical sleight of hand passes the blame for familial deviance onto whiteness, when the true villain of *Push* is Carl, the black patriarchal figure-head of Precious' family. Precious's unwavering loyalty to black separatism and the Nation of Islam both reflects the popular sentiments amongst black communities at the time, but also suggests that these male top-down organizations are a dead-end for black women like Precious as they don't truly acknowledge or speak to the abuses they have suffered.

While Precious identifies with black separatism, she ironically also idealizes whiteness, virtually leaving her in the middle of two groups that don't speak to her experiences as a black woman. On the other hand, Precious often appears to identify with whiteness as a way of coping

with abuse at home and feelings of marginalization. Interestingly, heinously graphic scenes in which Precious's father rapes her, are frequently disrupted by her own fantasies of whiteness. In one instance, she imagines herself as a movie star, "someone not fat, dark skin, short hair, someone not fucked. A pink virgin girl…A girl wif little titties whose self is luvlee just Luv-Vell-LEE!" (112). Some would argue that in these moments, Precious internalizes white supremacy. However, as a grotesque character, she merely reflects back to readers what society values. Precious attempts to distance herself from the dual marginalization Mollow articulates in fat blackness, by drawing a binary between her external appearance as "fat and black and ugly" (she ventriloquizes the colorist and ableist rhetoric leveled against her) and idealized whiteness. Thus, this identification with whiteness is an identification with the assumed protection of white womanhood. The black separatist rhetoric that Precious parrots, like white feminism, doesn't address her very immediate needs as a young black woman. The presumed valuation of white women and black masculinity that both obsessions connect to differ greatly from Precious's daily exposure to physical and verbal assault in her neighborhood and at home. On the streets Precious is heckled for her size, and at home, both her parents similarly make insulting comments about her appearance and continuously rape her. The stares that Precious is subjected to in her daily life as a grotesque figure work together to dehumanize her as an oddity. Thus, Precious's identification with white women and black separatist patriarchy intimate a yearning for the privilege of white women and black men. The love of black separatism and white beauty is a brilliant illustration of the rock and hard place black women find themselves in. Precious wants to be a part of black separatism—but its latent hypermasculinity locks out her lived experiences. And she similarly wants to be a part of white idyllic womanhood, but the emphasis on whiteness leaves Precious out. Ultimately, Precious has these two opposing ideals that she

identifies with, but neither acknowledge her experiences and furthermore as a black woman, she can't find herself in these movements.

So essentially, in looking beyond the surface-level stereotypes with Precious, she is a young woman who has been failed by all the authoritative figures in her life. Her mother Mary, verbally and physically abuses her, seeing her as a competitive lover rather than her daughter. And the State looks down upon Precious as another stereotypical welfare queen rather than a vulnerable citizen silently suffering in her own home. These authoritative bodies all use fear to suppress Precious into silence. While she looks to black militancy and white womanhood, neither group acknowledges her experiences as a black woman nor provides Precious with the language to speak to her grotesque embodiment. In the next section, I will examine how Sula challenges naturalized assumptions about gender propriety. However, in comparison to Precious, she struggles to express her own grotesque experiences as a counter to the gender performativity that she takes issue with. Later in the chapter I will consider how Precious's acceptance of grotesque embodiment gets her out of the binaries of performing for both black patriarchy and white liberal feminism.

IV.

In contrast to Eva and Precious, Eva enjoys a much greater sense of agency. Like Precious, Eva was a young, single black mother. However, instead of having to depend on the government for assistance, she becomes an enterprising business owner, establishing a boarding house. Of the three characters, Eva most readily fits conventional understandings of disability, given her amputation, which is the central sign of Eva's grotesquerie. In contrast to the conventional literary treatment of amputation, where amputation becomes a defining marker of

personal tragedy or an inherent evil,[20] the narrator mentions Eva's leg towards the beginning of the novel and doesn't acknowledge it again. Outside of a single reference to a makeshift wheelchair that Eva routinely sits in while "directing the lives of her children, friends, strays, and a constant stream of boarders" (Morrison 30), her amputation is never presented in stereotypical terms as a source of pity or a major obstacle in her life. The image of Eva sitting in the middle of her house, commanding the respect of those around her suggests that her disability doesn't keep her from full actualization and the financial independence of running her own boarding house.

While her sexuality isn't detailed, as is the case for Sula, it's apparent that (unlike the commonly asexualized character with a disability) Eva's disability doesn't keep her from desiring others or being desired by occasional admirers. In fact, her missing leg is a significant part of her appeal. The narrator mentions that she constantly wore dresses that cut off "mid-calf so that her one glamorous leg was always in view as well as the long fall of space below her left thigh" (31). Rather than hide her amputation, Eva draws attention to it as a key part of her aesthetic. By juxtaposing Eva's leg with the open space of her missing leg, the narrator seems to intimate that her bodymind is beautiful and 'glamorous' because of these gaps and fragments, not in spite of them. Even though mainstream beauty standards would label Eva disfigured, with all the stigma that comes with the term, within her own community, she has undeniable social capital, thus demonstrating how relative and unstable beauty is.

Although Eva presents a traditional kind of grotesquerie, grotesque strength identifies how even black women who possess less arresting bodily differences are subject to similar stares and gazes as spectacles. As opposed to Eva's highly visible marking, Sula's physical appearance

[20] For further discussion on popular disability myths, see Dolmage 31-62.

isn't necessarily aberrant. In fact, even as she ages along with the rest of the Bottom, the narrator sarcastically points out that "unlike [the Bottom, Sula] had lost no teeth, suffered no bruises…Except for a funny-shaped finger and that evil birthmark, she was free of any normal signs of vulnerability" (115). Whereas disability is commonly a reminder of human fragility, Sula's lack of bodily impairment signals to the Bottom her invincibility in escaping these inevitabilities, alluding to the conventional Strong Black Woman's indomitability. Although Sula's assumed indomitability echoes that of the Strong Black Woman, where the latter's indomitability often inspires, the absence of impairment and sickness for Sula becomes a source of vitriol for the town.

Although Sula's physical appearance isn't as aberrant as that of Eva or Precious, her birthmark signals her grotesquerie. The narrator notes how the birthmark "spread from the middle of [her eyelid] toward the eyebrow," giving Sula's "otherwise plain face a broken excitement and blue-blood threat" (52). The dangerous, erratic quality of the birthmark is a physical manifestation of the mysterious and unpredictable character of Sula. In a poetic, rather than essentialist sense, Sula's birthmark physically manifests her outspoken boldness as a character. While the birthmark is random and innocuous, it takes on a range of different meanings depending on who's gazing at Sula, from a romantic rose (52) to a malevolent snake (114). Garland-Thomson theorizes that the birthmark and its many interpretations embodies the social role of the Other as a receptacle for projected meaning. She argues that the mark "becomes the anchor for other's narrative meaning captur[ing] the essence of how cultural otherness is produced… Sula's body is a hyperlegible text from which her community reads its own preoccupations, fears, and hopes. The extraordinary aspect of her body makes her a spectacle…the point of reference for social boundaries" (121). Marginalized in an already

marginalized community, according to Garland-Thomson, Sula is a quintessential Other. I would argue that she is also a classic grotesque subject who demonstrates the intersections between narratives of racialized and gendered difference and narratives of disability. Her difference isn't just an ontological matter of being; it is a social role that serves a specific purpose. She becomes a repository for the Bottom's disappointments and frustrations, and a way for the townspeople to feel some level of dignity in a Jim Crow era town.

Departing from Garland-Thomson's discussion of difference, I want to connect back to the Bottom and their careful gaze that makes meaning out of difference. The Bottom is the singular community that casts its gaze upon Sula and her grandmother Eva. I briefly discuss the background of the Bottom and its founding to illustrate how, despite the town's efforts to alienate Otherized subjects like the Peace family, the Bottom is ironically an Otherized space in its own right. Considering that Sula is set during the Jim Crow era, the Bottom is an all-black, socially and geographically segregated town. White characters are largely absent from the novel. Thus, instead of seeing black women subjected to the white male gaze, an active black male gaze is a major component of the text. One of the few times readers encounter a white character in this novel is in a brief, farcical tale about the town's origin. In a tongue-in-cheek play on the widely contested topic of reparations, the Bottom was allegedly established from a bad negotiation between a former enslaved person and his enslaver. The enslaver described as "a good white farmer promised freedom and a piece of bottom land to his slave if he would perform some very difficult chores" (5). The reference to the farmer as "good" and "white" is a sarcastic nod to the rhetoric of white supremacy and ultimately, a tragic irony as the farmer is not benevolent and gives the slave worthless, arid land at the top of the Hill, deceitfully renaming it 'The Bottom'. Although the Bottom vilifies grotesque subjects, it is an ironically grotesque, topsy-turvy space

where normative logic and standard referential systems are inverted, as the literal geographic bottom becomes the top.

As a community born out of slavery, the Bottom exemplifies the American ideal of freedom—land possession. However, this freedom is tinged with the memory of exploitive black slave labor and trickery, which are cruel yet pivotal pieces of the larger national fabric that complicate romanticized American narratives like rugged individualism. There's an extensive discourse on the racial implications of Jim Crow, but scholars like Dennis Tyler are beginning to theorize that this stratification has just as much to do with disability as race. He notes that Jim Crow "was designed to disable black American bodies—stigmatizing African Americans at large, restricting their geographical mobility and movement in public spaces, inflicting physical and psychological wounds" (Tyler 187). Disability studies scholars balk at the metaphoric use of disability, believing that such metaphors belittle the lived experiences of the disabled. However, Tyler highlights the intersection of racism and disability in Jim Crow legislation. Outside of the commonly known violence of the era (i.e. lynching), Tyler notes that black bodyminds were not only literally maimed and destroyed, but everyday racism like segregation figuratively wore the spirit down into a state of social, economic, and institutional immobility. Ultimately, the Bottom embodies this notion of an immobilized Jim Crow era community, as their separation from the white town of Medallion, despite close proximity, is an ever-present reminder of their continued subjugation. This memory of their founding is a generational wound that dictates their treatment of those who are different. Even though the Bottom's founding illustrates the generational subjugation that African Americans have inherited, the seriousness of the town's history is reduced to the grim humor of a "nigger joke" about their founder and his enslaver (Morrison 4).

The juxtaposition of humor with tragedy is a classic example of Bakhtinian grotesquerie, as the narrator upsets readers' expectations of a solemn tone when discussing racial strife.

The Bottom and the narrator's gaze build up a narrative of Sula as a villain of almost mythic proportion immediately after she returns home from college. The narrator establishes a somber mood and introduces an adult Sula to the readers as a wicked woman whose return is "accompanied by a plague of robins," natural disasters, and disease (90-95). The narrator's connection of Sula to all the ills of society seems to foreshadow her eventual stigmatization in the Bottom, and her place as a proverbial yardstick that the townspeople define themselves against. She's not only outcast because she's socially different, but she has to become the means through which the Bottom can spin tales. These stories range from Sula putting Eva in a retirement home (112) or making a scandalous appearance "their church suppers without underwear, [Sula] bought their steaming platters of food and merely picked at it…They believed that she was laughing at their God. And the fury she created in the women of the town was incredible—for she would lay their husbands once and then no more" (114-15). It's apparent from the Bottom's projections of Sula that they see her as ungrateful. Their cooking doesn't satisfy her, neither do their husbands. Because Sula seems to have such an insatiable appetite, and nothing ever seems to be good enough for her, the Bottom demonizes her to compensate for the feelings of inadequacy that she raises. While the Bottom interprets Sula's insatiability as an insult, her most disgraceful alleged act for the Bottom is "the unforgivable thing…the dirt that could not ever be washed away" of allegedly sleeping with white men (112).

At times the narrator weaves rumors into the storyline to confirm them, like Sula's decision to move Eva to a nursing home. To provide some context, soon after Sula returns home, her and Eva get into a contentious fight over Sula still being unmarried, and all the obscure

events in their family history, from the death of Sula's mother, Hannah, to Eva's missing leg. This argument is followed up with a description of Eva being carried off to the nursing home. When Nel confronts Sula about sending Eva away, Sula confesses that "'I'm scared of her, Nellie. That's why…You don't know her. Did you know she burnt Plum…It's true. I saw it. And when I got back here she was planning to do it to me too" (100-101). In addition to Hannah, Plum is Eva's first child, and her only son. He goes off to fight in World War I, and returns home with mental trauma and a drug addiction. In assuming that Plum will waste away the rest of his life in this despondent state, Eva kills him by setting him on fire, rather than watch him wither away. Plum's death both illustrates the lengths of Eva's love as a mother. But his death also shows the extent of Eva's authority in her household, that she can give credence to her own foresight, whether she's wrong or right, and literally take someone's life in her own hands. Morrison seems to affirm this story about the nursing home to give readers access to some of Sula's innermost fear of Eva's absolute authority. This fear is tragically ironic because the independence that Sula fears in Eva is what makes them more alike than different.

Other stories the Bottom tells about Sula, remain shrouded in obscurity with no background context or explanation. The narrator simply drops these stories in as randomly as Sula's own behavior. These tales, whether true or not speak to Sula's amoral character, which seems to stem from a disinterest, and at times, an outright rejection of presumably benevolent institutions like religion that are credited with building ethics. Instead, what moves Sula are her own impulsive desires and needs, regardless of how subversive they may be. There are a number of scenes where Sula engages in taboo or outright depraved behavior. But Sula's most puzzling behavior is her affair with Nel's husband, Jude, and her witnessing her mother's death as a child. The narrator notes how these events all fuel the Bottom's contempt of Sula because "when they

saw how she took Jude, then ditched him for others…they forgot all about Hannah's easy ways (or their owns) and said she was a bitch. Everybody remembered the plague of robins that announced her return, and the tale about her watching Hannah burn was stirred up again" (112). In drawing a connective line between the affair, Hannah's sexual activity, and that of the Bottom, the narrator doesn't seem to make a distinction between Sula's affair with Jude and any of the other sexual transgressions that happen in the Bottom. These actions are all treated with parity. But within the context of the Bottom, Sula's behavior is treated as somehow the most contemptible, and this is the context that seems to carry the greatest stakes. Often these moments occur in a context of irony, and they are met with an emotional disconnect on Sula's part that differentiates her from the purposeful maliciousness of a villain, demonstrating that one-dimensional 'good vs. bad' roles like the latter are obsolete in this novel. Regardless of the truth or falsity of the townspeople's constant speculations about Sula, they function as a story within a story, and the novel becomes both an account of Sula's life and the Bottom's own punitive mythmaking of her.

Her ironic lifeline in the town is to clearly define the boundaries between herself and the rest of the Bottom so that they can propel themselves up. As the boundary between Sula's life and the Bottom's stories gradually disintegrates, and the gossip about the title character soon becomes true, the Bottom's narrative building begins to take on the magical realist quality of conjuring that anticipates the predominance of this theme in Morrison's oeuvre. The narrator even refers to the townspeople's gossip as "attempts at counterconjure" (112). Rather than use the gaze and gossip to control her bodymind, the purpose and 'magic' of these tools is that the townspeople's words come to fruition. Over time, as stories of Sula's transgressions surface, their initial assumptions of her being deviant are affirmed, and their worldview is sequentially

validated. Because whiteness, as embodied in the white enslaver at the novel's opening or the Medallion, remains mostly external to the text, through the Bottom's gaze and purposeful narrative building, Sula becomes the phantom of whiteness that the Bottom conjures up to dispose of. Sula becomes the face of Jim Crow era oppression that the Bottom feels every day. Thus, they take what's abstract and intangible, and transfer it to a tangible bodymind. I use the term "conjuring" to gesture towards Morrison's later work with the ghosts of enslaved ancestors in *Beloved* (1987). What's different between the metaphoric conjuring in *Sula* and that in *Beloved* is that with the former, it isn't the memory of slavery's trauma that haunts the text, it's the ghost of the Reconstruction era, and the failed promises of freedom that haunt the Bottom. Even though Sula is African American like the rest of the Bottom, her unconventional behavior, and her seeming dissatisfaction with every aspect of the town, makes her different and therefore gives the Bottom license to manifest her as a symbol of the whiteness that is absent from the town. As soon as they locate the source of subjugation in Sula, or as the narrator mentions, "the source of their personal misfortune" that gives them "leave to protect and love one another…cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes and in general band together against the devil in their midst" (117-118). By making Sula a stand-in for the intangible, everyday feelings of inequality, the Bottom can figuratively move forward with their lives and make progress. Morrison seems to suggest that a huge factor in the suffering during the Jim Crow era is not being able to put a face to those that oppress you.

It seems that the Bottom's rationale for despising Sula so vehemently is her privileging of grotesque strength over the more culturally familiar, maternal performance of strength. By refusing to sacrifice her labor to a family or the larger community by remaining unwed and childfree, Sula not only rejects the Strong Black Woman, but she embraces the Western,

masculinist privileging of the self over the collective. Ultimately, the stories the townspeople tell convey an intolerance for women like Sula who are not communal-oriented, who don't nurture their families nor their communities—essentially black women who don't reiterate conventional strength. Rather than get married and start a family like her best friend Nel does, Sula prioritizes herself and the intuitive pursuit of gratification. The narrator notes that Sula dedicates her life to "exploring her own thoughts and emotions, giving them full reign, feeling no obligation to please anybody unless their pleasure pleased her" (118). Sula's pursuit of pleasure completely opposes the social role carved out for women in the Bottom as caregivers. This performance of gender non-conformity is not only abnormal in the Bottom, but it is grotesque. It's important to note that Sula's individualist pursuits don't necessarily merit a masculine labeling. This binary thinking when it comes to gender of having to either perform a stereotypical notion of femininity or masculinity is rudimentary. However, in the Bottom, female identity is based around the pursuit of male companionship-- either through marriage or sexual conquests. When women are boxed into limiting categories like "'good' women" or "whores, who were hard put to find trade among black men" or "the middling women, who had both husbands and affairs," individualist passions like that of Sula are impulsively read as masculine and therefore grotesque (44). The negative reception of Sula's grotesque self-exploration demonstrates how African American tropes like the Strong Black Woman are deeply invested in a patriarchal structure, rather than the genuine interests and pleasures of black women. This investment is so deeply ingrained, that once you refuse to perform strength, you're perceived as the antagonist.

Because Sula is unable to participate in the masculinized narrative of rugged individualism in public, she builds a grotesque inner world that abandons all the gendered expectations of the Strong Black Woman. The narrator notes that instead of self-sacrificing and

nurturing like many of the other women in the Bottom, Sula's life revolves around her compulsions. She was "completely free of ambition, with no affection for money, property or things, no greed, no desire to command attention or compliments—no ego" (119). Ultimately, the reason Sula is unable to enjoy the autonomy that Eva enjoys is because she pursues a lifestyle that rejects her outright. The pairing of Western individualistic qualities like ambition and ownership with Sula's antithetical lifestyle interestingly reveals that the former is just as ego-centered as the latter. The crucial difference between the two modes of being is that the Western ideals the narrator lists off are wedded to masculinity that leaves women like Sula locked out. Sula only becomes a grotesque anomaly because of her embrace of a masculinist individualism that rejects her as a black woman.

Despite the ways that outsiders use their gaze to construct Sula as a grotesque antagonist, in the Bakhtinian tradition, she often subverts the gaze back on those around her, and interrogates the principles that dismiss her as deviant through action and dialogue. An instance of this inversion of power dynamics occurs when Sula's lover Ajax confides in her his feelings of powerlessness as a black man. Rather than console him and perform those expectations of black maternalism, Sula dismisses his grievances, noting America's obsession with black masculinity, and the sequential privilege that he possesses:

> White men love you. They spend so much time worrying about your penis they forget their own. The only thing they want to do is cut off a nigger's privates. And if that ain't love and respect I don't know what is…Colored women worry themselves into bad health trying to hang on to your cuffs. Even little children—white and black, boys and girls spend all their childhood eating their hearts out 'cause they think you don't love them. And if that ain't enough, you love yourselves. Nothing in this world loves a black man

more than another black man…So. It looks to me like you the envy of the world. (103-104)

Just like Bakhtin's grotesque, Sula takes the sexual tropes of blackness and flips them upside down. In Sula's eyes, the historic lynching of black men and the strategic representation of them as sexual predators aren't oppressive acts of terrorism, as they are so commonly referenced. Instead, these brutal events are really acts of love, eroticized jealousy, and adoration. More importantly, in the tradition of the grotesque, where conventional thinking is inverted in order for introspection to take place, it seems that the narrative around black men in America is inverted to show how black women have been completely erased. In this speech Sula gives, black women are literally sick figures hovering around this spectacle worrying about the welfare of black men and pining for their attention. Sula's thoughts anticipates one of the fundamental texts in black feminist theory, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men: But Some of Us Area Brave, Black Women's Studies* (1982), an anthology published nine years after *Sula,* which further solidifies this novel's place as a pioneer text in the black feminist movement. If we examine this scene from the lens of grotesque strength, it's possible that Sula's words are a critique of the Strong Black Woman. Sula seems to represent a bold refusal to play the role of the self-sacrificing matriarch who nurtures a wounded black patriarchy and operates for their approval. Instead of allowing one's self to be erased for the sake of protecting the larger community, she intimates that black women can both critically acknowledge the systemic attack lobbied against black men, and the way that they have been made invisible in the process.

In contrast to Sula, Nel embodies idealized womanhood, yet she is on the same pursuit of individuality as Sula, looking for individualism in socially accepted rather than grotesque spaces. Even though Sula and Nel are presented as opposites, they operate as one, thus departing from

heteronormative ideals of chivalrous romance. In the tradition of black feminist bonding circles, Morrison seems to suggest that a girlfriend, rather than a man, can be a soulmate. As a foil to Sula, Nel's timid demeanor makes Sula's strong-willed disposition all the more bold by comparison. However different Nel and Sula are, they forge a sisterhood in which "they found relief in each other's personality" (53). Sula fearlessly protects Nel; Nel in turn becomes someone for Sula to protect. They both provide each other with a bond that offers a reprieve from the loneliness and the circumscription of being black women (52). What eventually becomes a wedge in their relationship is Nel's marriage. Nel comes to prioritize her role as a wife and a mother because it gives her the "feeling of being needed by someone who saw her singly" and distinctively from Sula (84). It's worth pointing out that the person that Nel confides in and seeks for protection and love, Sula, is also the person that she tries to make herself distinctive from. Nel essentially disrupts her sisterly bond with Sula for a greater sense of individualism just as Sula does. The major difference is—Sula turns pleasure-seeking into an individualist pursuit, while Nel looks to marriage to feel like an individual.

This internalization of gender roles leads Nel to attempt to correct Sula's deviant behavior. When Nel confronts Sula, she reminds her that as a black woman "'you can't do it all… You can't act like a man. You can't be walking around all independent-like, doing whatever you like, taking what you want, leaving what you don't.'" To which Sula replies, 'You repeating yourself'… 'You say I'm a woman and colored. Ain't that the same as being a man?'" (142). As a betrayal to Sula, and the final blow to their friendship, Nel becomes the mouthpiece of the Bottom, the collective that despises Sula the most. Her criticism affirms the naturalized boundaries between men and women. However, Sula, as a grotesquely strong character,

provocatively blurs this boundary. In collapsing the terms "man" and "colored woman," Sula implies that Nel's efforts to perform respectable womanhood are all in vain.

We ironically see how black women can perform respectable womanhood and still not have access to the privileges that come with the label when an adolescent-aged Sula and Nel are walking in town together and attract the attention of a group of men, the narrator recounts how the men:

> In their lust, which age had turned to kindness…moved their lips as though to stir up the taste of young sweat on tight skin. Pig meat. The words were in all their minds. And one …of the young ones, said it aloud…His name was Ajax, a twenty-one-year-old pool haunt of sinister beauty…when he said 'pig meat' as Nel and Sula passed, they guarded their eyes lest someone see their delight. (50)

The act of watching, and the utterance of the phrase "pig meat" is quintessential grotesquerie as low debauchery and aestheticism intersect. This metaphor calls up crude, vaginal imagery that grotesquely suggests a parallelism between women and pigs, as opposed to the Western understanding of human being's hierarchical dominion over animals. At first, this brief exchange would seem to reinforce the storied dehumanization and fetishizing of black women. After all, Sula and Nel are objectified under a male gaze. However, what complicates this reading is the girls' covert delight in the utterance of the phrase "pig meat." Sula and Nel are not, in this instance, wholly silenced and degraded victims of sexual exploitation. While they are young women, and there is a level of debasement to the cat calls that can't be overlooked, their sexual arousal from the degrading compliment complicates what would otherwise be another iteration of the objectifying male gaze. Even though Sula and Nel are being watched, their delight gives them a greater sense of agency that complicates the common dynamic between men

as active voyeurs and women as oppressed, gazed-upon objects. In this instance, Nel and Sula at a young age show that it's not only difficult to access respectability, but performing respectable womanhood might not even be something to aspire to because it demands that female sexual desire be reduced to a smirk.

Considering that Nel's life as a mother and a wife doesn't spare her from the emptiness she feels once she ends her relationship with Sula, this prediction is apt. This loneliness is so palpable, it's depicted as "a gray ball hovering just [to the right of Nel] …A ball of muddy strings, but without weight, fluffy but terrible in its malevolence" (108-109). This metaphoric ball of loneliness haunts Nel up until she finally acknowledges and mourns the loss of her friendship with Sula, after Sula's death, intimating that outside of the normalized roles for women as mothers and wives, the relationship that gave Nel the most fulfilment was her friendship with Sula. Sula's inversion of gender demonstrates that the stark binaries Nel and the Bottom base the world around are ultimately only accessible to white people. Whether black women revel in the gender transgressions of grotesquerie like Sula, or perfectly embody a submissive and compassionate maternalism like Nel, Sula suggests that domesticity won't save black women like Nel from the masculine overdetermination of their bodies.

V.

After considering what makes Sula, Eva, and Precious grotesque, and the groups that ostracize them, in this final section I want to explore how these characters disrupt reader expectations for successful narratives. As opposed to the heroic narratives of the Strong Black Woman who often rises above her adversity to inspire readers, the character arcs of Sula and Precious are relatively flat. At the end of *Push*, Precious finds herself mired in the same poverty she was in at the novel's opening, facing the likely prospect of death with HIV. Sula is alone at

the conclusion of the text, having evicted Eva out of her boarding house and into a retirement home. And Sula's relationships with Nel and her lover, Ajax, are in shambles because of her actions. These failures create an anti-climactic effect that disrupts readers' expectations of dramatic victories for the protagonists. Critics like Therí Pickens would assert that this rupture of expectation is the payoff of centralizing disability. She contends that "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" (Pickens 95). Thus, when black disability becomes a focal point of narrative, not merely a rhetorical device or a familiar stereotype regurgitated for emotional effect, it disrupts ableist conventions. What writers and critics get in the wake of this upheaval is storytelling that is informed and literally shaped by the lived experience of marginalized blackness. Because grotesque strength occurs in a context of failure, disappointment, and death, it does this work Pickens discusses, of changing the shape of a text by disrupting the conventional linear plot. Neither *Push* nor *Sula* conclude with the protagonist resolving their major source of conflict or going through some dramatic change in character. Despite the seeming despondency of each character's conclusion, as grotesque figures, their failure challenges traditions in the African American literary canon, notably the conviction in the transformative potential of literacy and education. Tragically, the educational milestones that Sula and Precious achieve only lead to greater obstacles rather than a greater sense of freedom. Their ironic plot trajectories complicate notions of what success and failure look like when you're grotesquely strong. With my last findings, I hope to demonstrate that the grotesque is worth retrieving in African American literary discourse as these characters invert naturalized

assumptions about education and suggest that failure can become a way out of raced and sexualized subservience for black women.

The major theme that crystallizes Precious's sense of failure in *Push* is literacy because she places so much value on literacy as a symbol of her personal value. Precious views literacy as not only a means out of the stereotypical roles that society has carved out for black teen mothers like herself, but it comprises a significant part of her self-worth as she often in her journal entries structurally conflates herself and her son, Abdul, with letters in the alphabet, like the following excerpt: "I lv baby abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz/(I love baby)" (Sapphire 69). Literacy literally becomes an extension of Precious's sense of self. Both her love for Abdul, and her hope for being able to eventually provide for him are linked to being able to read and write. I liken this romanticizing of literacy to the depiction of literacy as the central means of independence and self-actualization in canonized slave narratives. In texts like Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) acquiring literacy is a climactic point that symbolizes his newfound manhood, and foreshadows his eventual escape to freedom. Because enslaved African Americans generally were forbidden to read, literacy was seen as an act of rebellion against white enslavers' efforts to dehumanize African Americans. Acquiring literacy proved humanity and intelligence despite the negative stereotypes touted about enslaved African Americans. In an interview, Sapphire credits Harriet Jacobs, a former enslaved person, who wrote about her experiences and escape in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave-Girl* (1861) as her primary influence in writing *Push*, particularly in regards to tackling the issue of child abuse. Sapphire describes Jacobs as "a woman who spent seven years confined in an attic. I mean, it was such an excruciating situation physically and spiritually, not to mention psychologically. I liken it to the confining and constricting nature of child abuse. But

this woman goes on to become a writer, mother, and activist" (35-36).

Sapphire imagines the sexual, verbal, and physical assault that Precious endures as metaphorically restrictive in the same way that Jacobs' literally confined herself to a crawl space for years in order to be free. I would add that just as Jacobs' confinement permanently disables her, Precious's daily experiences of abuse leave a mark on her, similarly immobilizing her development and blunting her self-worth. The fact that these two women become literally and figuratively disabled through restriction tangibly speaks to the circumscribed nature of being a black woman and the embodied stakes of these limitations. Thus, literacy plays such a pivotal part in transforming Precious's perception of herself and the world around her as it gives her the language to articulate unexplored feelings and what was previously unspeakable-- notably, the abuse she suffered at the hands of her parents. Once she can articulate the abuse as such, she is able to separate herself from these horrifying experiences, and truly see how the adults around her failed her. As Precious journals and tries to make sense of the abuse she has suffered, she becomes overcome with emotion but contends that:

> I will not cry when I am writing, 'cause number one I stop writing and number two I just don't always want to be crying like white bitch on TV movies. Since I ain' no white bitch… I am not Janet Jackson or Madonna on the inside. I always thought I was someone different on the inside. That I was just fat and black and ugly to people on the outside. And if they could see inside me they would see something lovely and not keep laughing at me…I just want to say when I was twelve, twelve, somebody hadda help me it not be like it is now. (125)

Before literacy, one of the defense mechanisms Precious employed to mentally survive sexual abuse was identifying with the assumed protections of whiteness. By imagining herself as

a beautiful white girl who has the autonomy to choose her sexual partners, Precious created a space for herself that was guarded from the sexual advances of her father. In this moment of retrospection, Precious speaks on this past preoccupation with the presumed virtues of whiteness. This reflection is a turning point for Precious. As she finds her own feminist voice through writing, she consequently refuses to ventriloquize the white center. Literacy enables both a spiritual and racial awakening for Precious. As a grotesque character, Precious's instance of character development demonstrates that the internalization of mainstream norms doesn't spare the fat, black subject from neglect, abuse or even death. While some would say that Precious demonstrates a greater sense of self-empowerment, this awareness doesn't necessarily translate into a consciousness of women's collective struggle, nonetheless a feminist voice, as I argue. I would counter that although Precious certainly isn't as vocal as Sula, she articulates the healing potential of sisterhood. Notably at an incest survivors meeting, Precious marvels at how women from various backgrounds all share a common experience of trauma that she has endured. She notes that it's "all kind of women here. Princess girls, some fat girls, old women, young women. One thing we got in common, no the thing, is we was rape…I'm alive inside. A bird is my heart. Mama and Daddy is not win. I'm winning. I'm drinking hot chocolate in the Village wif girls—all kind who love me" (130-131). The incest survivor's meeting opens up Precious's inner world. She realizes that it isn't only poor, black girls like herself who have been violated. Women she has perceived in the past as possessing cultural currency-- like white women, beautiful women or rich women-- don't enjoy as much protection as she initially fantasized about. They too can be sexual prey. This discovery of a collective of women who share her experiences is what liberates Precious more than learning how to read and write. Finding a

common bond amongst women and a space to voice her trauma—fosters a feminist consciousness and revitalizes Precious's spirit.

Although Precious views literacy as the ultimate means for independence, the fact that her newly acquired literacy yields more obstacles compels us to question her romanticizing of this theme. The case file that Precious's social worker, Ms. Weiss, drafts about her best illustrates the stagnation that literacy ironically produces in *Push.* Precious meets intermittently with Ms. Weiss throughout the novel, and these meetings are high stakes as Ms. Weiss updates her case file on Precious and gauges her progress in the GED program, Each One Teach One, and the state of her home life. Ms. Weiss and the meetings in which she drafts this case file together determine whether or not Precious can continue to qualify for public assistance. Like freedom papers in slave narratives, the case files are literal pieces of paper that possess both a potential means of freedom or further subjugation. Precious's case file tangibly symbolizes the abstract power of the State to readily define black women like Precious as dysfunctional. Early on in the text when Precious is unable to read, the case file Ms. Weiss drafts represents Precious's economic vulnerability as a welfare recipient. Precious reflects on the case files and asks herself, "I wonder what exactly do file say. I know it say I got a baby. Do it say who Daddy? What kinda baby? Do it say how pages the same for me, how much I weigh, fights I done had? I don't know what file say. I do know every time they wants to fuck wif me or decide something in my life, here they come wif the mutherfucking file" (28). The case file again signifies with the African American literary tradition of literacy as a means of freedom. In this instance, Precious's illiteracy binds her in dependency to the government. The case file takes a surface-level look at Precious and only reveals the stereotypical aspects of her life. But it fails to tell Precious's full story (the abuse, the generational poverty, etc.). As literal pieces of paper,

Precious's case file tangibly symbolizes the power of the State to readily define black women like Precious as dysfunctional and excessive. More importantly, these extensions of the State conduct surveillance on Precious and police her bodymind, exercising the authority to deem her a fit or deviant citizen, and discipline or reward her accordingly. The fact that Precious is illiterate and can't read Ms. Weiss's observations about her only widens the chasm between herself and the State, solidifying her place as an objectified subject of study.

Although Precious's illiteracy leaves her helpless to the whims of the State, once she learns how to read, the restrictions of intersectionality in her life hardly change, unlike the transformation literacy provides for black people in slave narratives. This plateau in Precious's character arc is crystallized when she retrieves her case file and reads Ms. Weiss's observations on her. Despite Precious's ceaseless efforts to hone her reading and writing skills, in the case file Ms. Weiss depicts Precious as a welfare queen who "'views the social service system and its proponents as her enemies, and yet while she mentions independent living, seems to envision social services, AFDC, as taking care of her forever'" (120). This scene is a culminating point in Precious's journey to take over her life as she acquires the skills to finally bridge the gap between herself and the State. Yet, despite the significance of this scene, the overall mood is anti-climactic. Precious learns to read only to discover the circumscribed social position that has been carved out for her. This moment is incredibly pejorative in tone, as it suggests that no matter what Precious does and regardless of her efforts to become a normative and productive citizen, the State will always perceive her as the vampire and the welfare queen. Ultimately, Precious's literacy doesn't yield substantial freedoms, but instead places her subjugation in a clearer light. Romanticized notions of independence aside, she can truly see how mired into the system she truly is. Readers essentially find Precious in an incredibly confined position at the

end of *Push* that begs a reconsideration of literacy as inherently beneficial and transformative for black subjects.

Although Sula represents the ideals that Precious strives for in being literate, educated, and desirable, she is in a circumscribed position as well, which furthers the implicit message that literacy and attempting to fit within the center only leads to greater stagnation for black women. Despite her pursuit of higher education, as a black woman in the 1930s, she has very few outlets for self-expression, and the implications of a life constrained by racism and sexism are still defining features of her character arc. The narrator in *Sula* comments on the tragically limited nature of her life, intimating that "her strangeness, her naivete, her craving for the other half of her equation was the consequence of an idle imagination…And like any artist with no art form, she became dangerous" (Morrison 121). Much of what makes Sula an outsider in the Bottom is the fact that she is an educated black woman with no peers. As a testament to the inequality of the time, Sula stands alone in her success. But rather than be celebrated for her singularity, she is left stranded and alienated with no means to express her talent and skills, and a consequential void of unfulfillment. For all intents and purposes, Morrison presents Sula as a black feminist cautionary tale in the sense that she embodies the self-destruction that occurs when black female creative voices are silenced. Whereas, Precious is constructed as a sympathetic, victimized character in light of her continued obstacles. Sula comes out of her struggles as a rebellious, yet dangerous threat.

While gender and race dictate Sula's opportunities to maximize her potential, they also ironically provide her with one outlet for self-expression—sexuality. Sula gains a reputation in the Bottom for being lascivious. While her exploits appear to be purely carnal and reiterate stereotypes about reckless black female sexuality, Morrison makes sex a means of aestheticism

for Sula. Readers can see the connection between eroticism and art when Sula has sex with her lover Ajax and mentions to him, "'If I take a chamois and rub real hard on the bone, right on the ledge of your cheek bone, some of the black will disappear. It will flake away into the chamois and underneath there will be gold leaf…then I can take a chisel and small tap hammer and tap away at the alabaster" (130). In a peak moment of intimacy between Sula and Ajax, she reveals her latent urge to create art. On the one hand, the fact that sex becomes Sula's sole means of intimate connection and actualization in her adult years is somewhat disheartening as it suggests how circumscribed black women are. On the other hand, her perspective on eroticism is quintessentially grotesque as she elevates what society deems lowly and crude to a crucial vehicle for introspection. Morrison risks perpetuating the myth of uncontrolled, black female sexuality as Sula develops a salacious reputation in the Bottom for her sexual exploits. However, sexuality for Sula is more than just a space for mindless, auto-erotic satisfaction. It's the one outlet where she can explore and express herself. Rather than champion the stereotype of excessive black sexuality, that is to say, take what was created for and projected onto black women, and appropriate it as one's own. Morrison radically changes this construct and the relationship between black women and sex that it explicitly dictates. Eroticism in this context is no longer proof of inferiority. Nor is it a patriarchal act in service to others. Sex functions here as a means of escapism and a way of reversing the daily feelings of purposelessness and dehumanization for black women like Sula.

While race and gender seem to box Sula and Precious in with limited options for advancement or expression, in a befuddling way, Eva's disability enables her to enjoy a greater sense of autonomy. Rumors constantly circulate in the Bottom about how Eva was able to establish her own boarding house, but the various theories all circle back to her amputated leg.

However, unlike Sula, Eva's amputation is something she has a measure of narrative control over as people around her often "pretended to ignore it, unless…she began some fearful story about it—generally to entertain children. How the leg got up by itself one day and walked on off…Somebody said Eva stuck it under a train and made them pay off. Another said she sold it to a hospital for $10,000" (31). In parallel to Sula, Eva is a fully externalized character as people around her create stories about her impairment and project signification onto mere bodily difference, and readers never gain access to her mind. The crucial distinction between the various meanings given to Sula's birthmark versus the stories created about Eva's leg is that the stories about Eva are not projections of anger and frustration. Essentially, the folkloric legend around Eva's leg focuses on locating a figure of inspiration who resists the oppression they all face. While the rumors about Eva's leg vary, they all put her in a role of agency where she astutely takes advantage of the implicitly white spaces of government institutions. Regardless of whether or not Eva had her leg amputated for money, the importance of her disability is that it signifies with the historic commodification of black women's bodies. Instead of being victimized and exploited, allowing others to define her value, Eva literally makes money off of a bodymind that ableism would define as broken and valueless.

Just as Morrison's characters are impacted by the history of U.S. racial dynamics, both Eva and the narrative constructed around her are informed by the racialized, sexualized, and ableist history of black women in America. However, according to Garland-Thomson, a pattern in Morrison's body of work is that characters are never victimized by this history. For Garland-Thomson, Morrison's novels insist that African American culture is "informed by the institutional injustices, and devastating consequences of racism. Nevertheless, Morrison's characters are not victimized or demoralized, nor do they lead diminished lives" (116). Thus,

when we connect Garland-Thomson's observation to *Sula*, the rumors around Eva's amputation allude to and modify black women's exploited embodiment in history by placing her in a position of control. Morrison seems to intimate, with the open-ended nature of Eva's impairment, that black people are not only unvanquished by their history, but through storytelling, they actively engage with this history. Eva is the trickster figure who manipulates the power structure symbolized by the inscrutable, white enslaver at the novel's opening. The fact that Eva is undefeated by this history, while it completely demoralizes Sula and makes her into an example of failed potential, is Eva's power as a fully realized grotesquely strong character. Like tropes within African American literature, her bodymind is a text that operates within the larger context of exploitation and capitalism that is so familiar to black female subjecthood. Yet, Eva's ability to elude each rumor and avoid being fixed to a particular story reveals the potential of grotesque strength. The discourse around Eva's leg in turn reveals a presumption amongst observers in the Bottom that black impairment is never randomly acquired. It's always attained in the context of financial imperative and resistance to the white power structure. Despite mainstream illustrations of disability as the termination of a full life, the lore behind Eva's leg implies that black female subjects gain greater independence when their bodyminds are no longer able to produce labor. Eva's sense of freedom is ironic, when we compare her character arc to Sula and Precious's pursuit of inclusion in the mainstream and more vocal acts of resistance that leads to more disappointment and frustration.

Although Eva resides in the marginalized space of her boarding house, she is the most liberated character of the three. Unlike Sula, who is unable to maximize her potential in the mainstream and consequently opts to become a pariah in the Bottom, Eva's marginal identity doesn't stop her from becoming a leader in her own community. And unlike Precious, who

perpetually tries to become more than just a proverbial cog in the bureaucracy of the State, Eva manages to create her own microcosm on her own terms, distinctive from the center.

As a grotesque figure, the contrast between Eva's relative success and her continued marginalized position, as an amputee black woman running a shabby boarding house, forces readers to re-think how we define success. Halberstam contends that traditional notions of success are greatly limited to gendered rites of passage like marriage and motherhood. He points out that "success in a heteronormative, capitalist society equates too easily to specific forms of reproductive maturity combined with wealth accumulation" (Halberstam 2). The heteronormative narrative of success reflects the larger power structure and undoubtedly locks out multiple queer groups. Furthermore, despite common assumptions, according to Halberstam, success is not an objective social phenomenon. Often the misconception is that "success happens to good people and failure is just a consequence of a bad attitude rather than structural conditions" (qtd in Halberstam 3). According to Halberstam, a misconception with success is that it's something you can consciously and purposely will in your favor through ethics, hard work, and an optimistic outlook. In other words, if you maintain a sense of morality and a bright disposition, you can essentially manifest success. This assumption about success is grossly inaccurate because it overlooks the ways that access to resources, nepotism, and a number of other factors create disparities in success, and why some individuals, like Precious and Sula perpetually exist in a state of disadvantage. Halberstam's definition of success primarily focuses on gender issues, by tying the traditional notion of success to gendered rites of passage like heteronormative marriage and reproduction. While failure is commonly perceived as a degrading and stigmatizing experience, Halberstam argues that if success is mired in gendered institutions

like motherhood and marriage that are historically repressive for women, failure for women can be a means for greater freedom and a way of escaping compulsive normativity.

Push and *Sula* insinuate that gendered notions of success can be traumatizing for black women. Motherhood for instance, isn't a marker of accomplishment for Precious, but is instead associated with the violence of incest and rape. And despite the ways that Sula pursues a masculine sense of individualism throughout the novel, when she does attempt to be domestic and submissive to her lover, Ajax, her actions only backfire as he rejects her, leaving her to face her eventual death alone. Gendered success is clearly oppressive for the two, but bypassing it doesn't necessarily lead to the greater liberation that Halberstam envisions. In fact, based on the obstacles that I outlined in the previous section, it would seem that black women have little access to Halberstam's redemptive failure. However, Eva does illustrate this redemptive failure or as I would call it, success in a marginalized space. Like the vampire that Precious identifies with at the opening of *Push*, Eva revels in her stigmatization and presides over her own space with calculated intensity. Her boarding house, like many spaces in Morrison's novels, are "counterdomain[s]" of the grotesque, "ruled by poor, black, manless, disabled women" as an "inversion of the power structure based on normate privilege and status" (Garland-Thomson 124) as those who are conventionally the least empowered wield the most dominance. Eva's ability to create and act as the head of her own grotesque space is essentially the key distinction between Eva, Precious and Sula.

With Precious, Sula, and Eva, each character's inability to conquer their adversity, holds up a mirror to the archetypal Strong Black Woman whose compulsion to overcome defines their trajectories as failures. Black disability studies scholarship is beginning to consider the intersections between the Strong Black Woman and disability, although at face value, they would

presumably clash. Anna Hinton contends that "The strong black woman model leaves very little room for the presence of disability. Moreover, it places the onus for dealing with oppressive conditions on individuals, perpetuating the myth of individualism and the discourse of personal responsibility, rather than forcing societal change" (Hinton 451). Like the disability studies trope of the supercrip, the Strong Black Woman is deeply wedded to the overcoming narrative. As she performs her fortitude and overcomes her strife, the Strong Black Woman inspires and dangerously reinforces the false idea that oppression doesn't truly exist. Any obstacles to access and equality are a matter of individual willpower rather than social stratification. Ultimately, although this archetype may motivate some, she also perpetuates the status quo. As the Strong Black Woman erases the realities of racism and sexism, she also erases the diversity of black female experience including that of the disabled, as her able bodymind becomes the only readable representation of black womanhood. In contrast, the failure that contextualizes grotesque strength offers black female fortitude a way out of serving and being victimized by white hegemony and black patriarchy.

Conclusion

With many narratives in which a conventionally strong female character is placed at the center, readers expect the character to overcome whatever adversity has been placed before them and to succeed. Overcoming obstacles and inspiring others is a part of the appeal of the Strong Black Woman. Yet a problem with these overcoming narratives is that they make it the character's objective to pick themselves up by their proverbial bootstrap. The grotesquely strong characters that I analyze don't maximize their full potential, they don't secure absolute independence, and two of the three characters face death in the conclusion. Yet, in their failure, these characters do what a Strong Black Woman who overcomes adversity doesn't necessarily

do—they draw attention to the highly circumscribed positions disabled and bodily variant black women find themselves in. Grotesque strength is a physically and spiritually subversive quality some variant black female characters possess that invokes the survivalism and independence of the Strong Black Woman in a context of failure and even death. Ultimately, in this chapter I argue that grotesque strength modifies the Strong Black Woman by situating her independence and survivalism in a context of failure. Grotesque strength more importantly allows us to read failure against the assumptions of ableism. Rather than understand failure as inherently negative, grotesque strength demonstrates its redemptive qualities.

In being overweight, illiterate, and diagnosed with HIV, Precious is the most overdetermined of the three characters. She constantly tows the line between hyper-visibility, because of her bodily differences, and invisibility because of the stereotypes projected onto her as a welfare queen and a vampire of the State. Precious' mention of herself as a vampire speaks to this racialized vitriol leveled against single black mothers, as presumed burdens on society to be killed, jailed, or rehabilitated into laborers. While critics have decried Precious and the filmic adaptation of the character, claiming that a character facing such extensive subjugation is unrealistic, and worse, a stereotypical misrepresentation of black youth. But Sapphire makes a point to connect every potentially stereotypical feature with Precious, from her weight to her illiteracy, to some form of structural inequality. By doing so, Sapphire humanizes Precious and forces readers to come to terms with the way they have overlooked real women facing the same barriers as Precious.

Interestingly, the complexity and humanity that Sapphire builds Precious's characterization around isn't extended to Mary. For all intents and purposes, Mary is the major villain of the novel. She's both monstrous and unsettling in her appearance, and her behavior

towards Precious is equally grotesque. Mary fails to acknowledge the bond between herself and Precious as mother and daughter. Rather than provide maternal compassion and care, she misreads Precious as her romantic competition for her partner, Carl's affection and accordingly abuses Precious sexually and verbally. The discord between the rich characterization of Precious and the one-dimensional limits of Mary on the one hand is reflective of Precious's subjective and somewhat unreliable perspective as the first-person narrator throughout *Push*. Others may view Mary as a joke, but in Precious's eyes, Mary embodies her greatest fear of becoming her mom, a lonely, miserable woman completely dependent on the State for financial support, and preying upon her own children. Thus, from Precious' perspective, Mary becomes the literal monster of her nightmares. On the other hand, Sapphire also constructs Mary as a flat character in order to discredit the prominence and assumed value of the black matriarchal stereotype and illustrate how even these benevolent stereotypes are monstrous in their simplicity. Although Precious faces daily abuse from her parents, she is grossly neglected as the State fails to intervene and protect her. The State, instead, surfaces throughout the novel as apathetic white stewards who perceive her as another proverbial welfare queen in the system.

Precious looks to black patriarchy and idyllic white womanhood to find her voice. When Precious faces abuse from her parents or strangers in public, she quotes Louis Farrakhan or imagines herself as a beautiful white woman to assuage the pain. Although black patriarchy and white womanhood seem diametrically opposed, what they have in common is their neglect of black women's issues. Precious never fully sees herself, and the issues she faces reflected in either of these spaces, thus demonstrating to readers black women's troubled position in constantly having an aspect of identity ignored regardless of the group they attempt entry into. Black women are marginalized for being women in black rights groups. And they're

marginalized for being black in women's rights groups. Eventually, Precious finds refuge in women of color-led groups like the continuation school, Each One Teach One, that she is sent to after flunking high school, and an incest survivor's counseling group. While Precious isn't as explicitly feminist as Sula, in the black feminist tradition of female bonding, Precious finds solidarity with other women who have been discarded by society and finds healing in these spaces.

In acquiring literacy, Precious's entire self-perception and worldview radically shifts. Literacy gives her the language to articulate unexplored feelings and trauma that she previously couldn't put into words. More importantly, Precious comes to identify her own black feminist voice. She uses this critical voice to identify and hold accountable the oppressive factors and individuals in her life, notably her parents and the State. Literacy in African American literature, notably the genre of slave narratives, have historically symbolized dramatic internal transformation, newfound dignity, and most importantly freedom. However, literacy in *Push* merely leads to a greater self-knowledge and an understanding of how she has been victimized by others. Literacy places Precious' subjugation in greater relief for her to understand, but it holds no transformative potential. Precious ends the novel completely divorced of Mary, but with no way of financially supporting herself and her son and facing the likely prospect of death with HIV.

What connects Sula and Precious is their inability to be viewed as victims of racist and sexist circumstance. They consequently become scapegoats for their communities. As a single black mother, Precious assumes the blame for all of society's ills and the assumed dysfunction of the black community. Although Sula lives in a segregated black town, her amoral disinterest in gender roles, paired with her prioritizing of impulsive desires lead the Bottom to ostracize her.

The town's alienation of Sula is ironic because the Bottom is a grotesque space in and of itself where reason is inverted and the seriousness of structural inequality is made into a joke. The Bottom is a town tormented by the ghost of the Reconstruction era and the promises of social advancement that failed them in their founding. Thus, because of Sula's reckless and unconventional behavior, and her dissatisfaction with every aspect of the Bottom, the town makes Sula a stand-in for the phantom of whiteness that haunts their daily existence, in order to discard these memories and move forward. The Bottom polices Sula by watching her every move. And Sula's comes to clearly define the boundaries between herself and the rest of the Bottom so that they can prop themselves up. The vitriol Sula receives for her grotesque self-exploration demonstrates how African American tropes like the Strong Black Woman are deeply invested in a patriarchal structure, rather than the genuine interests of black women. The collective expectation for black women to be maternal and nurturing is so deeply ingrained in, that once you refuse to perform strength, you're vehemently castigated as the antagonist.

Like Precious, Sula similarly acquires a type of literacy in earning an education, but this accomplishment leaves her isolated with no peers and no outlets for expression, forcing her to return to the Bottom. Sula only has her outspoken, critical voice. She interestingly troubles naturalized gender roles and narratives of black masculinity and womanhood. As a grotesque character she reminds those around her that whether black women challenge norms or perfectly embody a submissive maternalism like Nel, domesticity and respectability won't save them from the masculine overdetermination that has been projected on their bodies. Sula and Precious provide much-needed commentary in monologues and conversations with other characters that troubles assumptions about respectability and misogynoir. The way that these characters question presumptions about the value of respectability as a pathway to success, and black women's role

as caregivers in their communities, is ultimately the potential of grotesque strength. Nonetheless, their circumstances are unchanged, they still face the same obstacles, and worse, death their flat character arcs reveal that establishing a critical black feminist voice alone is not transformative or liberating. By betraying readers' expectations for linear character arcs, grotesque strength is an instance of bodily variance that changes the shape of the text as scholars like Pickens have theorized. As grotesque characters, Sula and Precious shift the importance of literacy narratives in African American literature. *Push* and *Sula* reveal how grotesque characters, no matter how seemingly normative, in the case of the titular character Sula, or deviant, in the case of Precious, are frequently unable to grow beyond the circumstances they're born into, as linear trajectories of success in literacy narratives would suggest. Ultimately, Sula's and Precious' trajectories are so different from Eva because unlike Eva who embraces her disability as a key part of her identity, the black feminist voices Sula and Precious craft prioritize race, gender, and class over impairment. Sula and Precious overlook their bodily variance as significant to their worldview until the very end of their respective novels. And in Precious' case, she may refrain from parroting white idealized beauty, but even in the conclusion of Push, she still privileges physically able heteronormativity as the standard.

Even though Eva Peace most closely aligns with the conventional notion of the grotesque, she defies popular representations of the disabled. Eva's ability to build her own community is a key distinction that spells out her success and the tragic failings of Sula and Precious. Countless rumors circulate in the Bottom about her missing leg. In the tradition of the grotesque, they illustrate more about the values of a Jim Crow era black town than about Eva. In their search for a figure of inspiration, they identify Eva as their unlikely champion and weave a narrative that transforms the historic exploitation of black women's bodyminds into a tale of a

black woman who manipulates the government and by extension, whiteness, to her advantage. Regardless of the Bottom's efforts to turn a bodymind that society would deem valueless into a cunning businesswoman, and the truth or falsity of these stories, Eva remains somewhat enigmatic, and that inability to be defined or figured out, in and of itself is the heart of grotesque strength. She builds her own grotesque community of misfits that she presides over as both matriarch and trickster. For all intents and purposes, Eva is still in an incredibly marginalized position being an amputee black woman who runs a shabby boarding house. However, she is also a fully actualized character. Eva demonstrates the usefulness of grotesque strength as she challenges the boundaries of normativity and begs a re-consideration of how we define success. Eva's grotesque lifestyle offers black female characters a way out of hegemonic structures and suggests a re-consideration of black womanhood that isn't defined by ableist assumptions of strength or rooted in patriarchal notions of servitude.

Through my analysis of Eva, I complicate Jack Halberstam's theoretical work on failure. Halberstam contends that success is not necessarily tied to materialism or financial acquisition but is instead bound up with heteronormative marriage and reproduction. In this regard, if success is bound to patriarchal institutions, Halberstam asserts that failure should be embraced rather than avoided as a way out of compulsory heteronormativity. In focusing exclusively on gender, Halberstam's theorization of success overlooks women like Eva who are marginalized beyond gender. For women in Eva's position, access to gendered success is greatly informed by class and race, and more specifically her approximation to white privilege. More importantly, while Halberstam suggests that an extensive range of people can tap into the freedoms of redemptive failure by rejecting patriarchy, the drastic contrast in outcomes for Eva, Sula, and Precious suggest that for grotesque black female characters, rebuffing patriarchy and honing a

feminist voice isn't adequate. Embracing bodily difference is what's needed to access this redemptive failure.

By uniting strength and vulnerability, rather than denying the latter, grotesque strength strips black womanhood of its impulsive and at times empty perseverance and presents a greater sense of human complexity. The grotesque figures in *Sula* and *Push* prove that the burdens of misogynoir and domesticity that the Strong Black Woman shoulders are entirely too much to overcome. With Precious, Sula, and Eva, each character's inability to conquer the odds of the social structure holds up a mirror to the archetypal Strong Black Woman whose compulsion to overcome defines their trajectories as failures. Furthermore, in the subversive tradition of the grotesque, their failure offers black women a way out of deft service to a white hegemony and black patriarchy that exploit them. In the next chapter, I will continue to explore the ramifications of the black feminist voice in the medical world and how the genre of memoir complicates the dynamics between black women seeking treatment and medical authorities.

Chapter Two

'Good Morning Heartache': Balancing Strength and Pain in Audre Lorde's *Cancer Journals* and Meri Nana-Ama Danquah's *Willow Weep for Me*

Black women have historically had an incredibly fraught relationship with medical spaces. Where, for others, the medical industry is a space for dependable care, for black women, it is often an extension of racist patriarchal authorities. Historians attribute pivotal scientific discoveries and even entire sects of the medical industry to the exploitation and labor of black women. Harriet A. Washington affirms that "historically, African Americans have been subjected to exploitative, abusive, involuntary experimentation at a rate far higher than other ethnic groups" (21). Modern gynecology, for instance, largely exists because of experimental work done on enslaved African American women in the nineteenth century like Anarcha Westcott, Betsey Harris, and Lucy Zimmerman that caused the women irreparable bodily damage. More recently, Rebecca Skloot's book, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (2010), and the 2017 film adaptation raised public awareness about Henrietta Lacks, a black American woman whose cancer cells became the basis of countless breakthroughs in medical research, though the ethics and legality of how her cells were obtained by medical researchers are still up for debate. Beyond Lacks, many black women have made sacrifices, either willingly or unwillingly, that still go uncredited in medical history. Ultimately, the myth of black women's physical durability is the lasting legacy of this experimental work.

Ultimately, a conversation about the Strong Black Woman is incomplete without considering the medical industry. Antebellum-era medical tracts and journals house some of the earliest musings about black female strength. In fact, the belief that black women are physically invulnerable helped justify this early experimentation. Deirdre Cooper Owens explains that "slave hospitals were the premier site for creating theories about black women's exceptionality as 'the other'" and the "'medical superbody'" (7). Cooper Owens coins the term "medical superbody," which "represent[s] a being that was treated as something between human and lower primate in sickness and in health" (109). The relationship between chattel slavery and the slave hospital was circular in the sense that slave masters touted the myth of black labor capability, which thus informed the treatment enslaved subjects received in the hospital. And the slave hospital in turn validated this myth of black invulnerability. Mythic black strength informs Cooper Owens' notion of an enslaved medical superbody or a grotesque bodymind, presumed to exist somewhere between human and animal. More importantly, critics such as Angela Davis have noted that gender distinctions, while common amongst white subjects, were entirely absent with enslaved black women because of the pressure placed on them to work as strenuously as men to uphold an entire regional economy (4). Recent scholarship complicates Davis's reading of gender during slavery, as Thavolia Glymph asserts that enslaved black women weren't strenuously laboring non-women, but women who refused to help white mistresses live up to gendered standards of domesticity:

> The ideology of domesticity required enslaved women to work for the plantation household as if their own interests were involved. Their failure to do so made it hard for mistresses to meet the emerging standards of domesticity. Mistresses couched black women's noncooperation as a refusal to be 'better girls,' in terms that suggested innate

> backwardness. This, not discontent under slavery, made them unalterably inefficient, slothful, and dirty. This was the source of their 'misbehavior' and could be used to explain mistresses' violent responses. (6)

According to Glymph, idealized womanhood wasn't something that black women were completely cut off from, as previous writers have theorized. Instead, idyllic womanhood was a fantasy that enslaved women were expected to labor and toil to make real, as if it was their own womanhood on the line, and their white mistresses' interests were their own. Black women who refused to work on behalf of whiteness were accordingly demonized. However, regardless of cooperation or not, enslaved black women could be "better girls," but they could never be southern gentle women. This caveat was thought to make black women deviant, inherently different from white women, and consequently perfect superbodies who could bear the often fatal danger of experimentation.

Ultimately, it's unclear which came first, the myth of the Strong Black Woman came before or after antebellum-era racist experimentation. What is indisputable is that historically, the medical industry has affirmed the endurance of the Strong Black Woman myth, and even today medical practitioners deny black patients proper treatment and care because of this trope. Medical practitioners routinely deny black patients pain medication and misdiagnose them.[21] In a 2003 report, the National Academy of Medicine (NAM) concluded that "racial and ethnic minorities receive lower-quality health care than white people—even when insurance status, income, age, and severity of conditions are comparable" (Institute of Medicine). According to a 2019 report conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), African

[21] For further discussion on racial disparities in the medical world, see Somashekhar.

American women are "two to three times more likely to die from pregnancy related causes than white women" (CDC). These alarming statistics illustrate how fatal perceptions of black strength can be when black subjects must seek out treatment as patients.

I draw this brief history about black women's role as exploited scientific specimen in the medical industry to demonstrate how existing narratives about blackness largely inform the treatment black women receive. Meanwhile, black women's memoirs and medical narratives such as Meri Nana-Ama Danquah's *Willow Weep for Me: A Black Woman's Journey Through Depression* (1998) and Audre Lorde's *Cancer Journals* (1980) disrupt this longstanding tradition of silencing and objectifying black women in the medical space by detailing each author's experiences, with clinical depression, in the case of Danquah, and recovery from breast cancer in Lorde's case. With this chapter, I hope to tease out the nuanced relationship sick black women have with the mythic strength they supposedly possess. On the one hand, the Strong Black Woman, in her denial of human fragility, leaves no ontological room for sick black women like Lorde and Danquah, virtually deeming their experiences with vulnerability invalid. Yet on the other hand, mythic strength becomes the balm that some black women living with chronic illness, like Lorde, depend on to cope with erasure. Externalized tropes like the Strong Black Woman overdetermine Lorde's and Danquah's bodyminds in medical spaces. Thus, a central conflict in these two memoirs, especially with *Willow Weep for Me*, is the struggle Danquah undergoes to move past the externalization of black women in the medical world as objects of study**,** and establish a sense of self rooted in disability and vulnerability.

It's important to note that this is the only chapter that explores nonfictional texts, specifically memoirs. I decided to examine memoirs about disability because fragility exists at the heart of illness, and Danquah and Lorde consequently take the theme of vulnerability to task

in ways that differ from able-bodied authors. On the one hand, Lorde's and Danquah's thought-provoking examination of vulnerability is possible because the two lived with impairment. On the other hand, the genre of memoir itself is confessional writing in the first-person narrative perspective that allows the author to divulge the most intimate aspects of their experiences with sickness that may be less likely in a fictional novel where the author can position themselves behind a character or stand completely outside of the text. In *Cancer Journals* and *Willow Weep for Me*, Lorde and Danquah offer up their pained bodyminds as compelling evidence of their arguments for inclusion, and this disclosure is an unparalleled gesture of vulnerability. Lorde and Danquah not only lay out rich and timely conversation about illness, but in Danquah's case, she presents an admirably self-focused alternative to the conventional strength that perpetually serves others.

I additionally turn to memoir because of the way it mediates identity. The author shows readers how they view themselves in private, and what they choose to emphasize and downplay in their self-presentation to others. As I will demonstrate in the chapter's last section, Lorde and Danquah at times perform rebellious versions of themselves on the page that point to the idiosyncrasies of the Strong Black Woman, especially when the narrators censor more complicated words or emotions in favor of performing this figure. By centering their memoirs on the initial illness, treatment, and healing of their bodyminds, Lorde and Danquah tackle the theme of embodiment. Black feminists have discussed embodiment at length, in terms of the eroticization of black women. Rather than focus on sexuality, Lorde and Danquah instead approach embodiment from the perspective of impairment and medical intervention. By examining chronically sick and impaired embodiment, readers see the extent that sick black

women struggle to see themselves in master narratives about black womanhood, and therefore how ableist these master narratives are.

The conversations *Cancer Journals* and *Willow Weep for Me* frame around gender and race have led to their canonization in disability studies and women's studies respectively. S. Lochlann Jain summarizes the pre-eminence of *Cancer Journals* within gender studies, noting that it made Lorde "the primary feminist theorist of breast cancer," and "the final word on breast cancer and gender theory" (507). *Cancer Journals* is such a crucial text because it radically asserts that identity is key to healing and treatment. Lorde presents breast cancer as a political and public health crisis, and women as victims disparately affected by the sexist practices of the medical world. She urges women to refrain from considering breast cancer a "secret personal problem. It is no secret that breast cancer is on the increase among women in America. According to the American Cancer Society's own statistics on breast cancer survival, of the women stricken, only 50% are still alive after three years. This figure drops to 30% if you are poor, or Black" (Lorde 63). *Cancer Journals* continues to be a standard and a "rubric in gauging the effectiveness of contemporary feminisms" (Waples 55).

Critics and scholars similarly credit Danquah's *Willow Weep* for drawing much-needed critical attention to the greater need for inclusion of race in conversations about mental illness. She illuminates how black men and women have had no access to "the noble tradition of melancholia" (Hoffman and Hansen 293) and the romanticized rhetoric of mental illness. In other words, while mental illness is used to explain away criminal behavior or creative genius when the subject is white, Danquah exposes how black mental illness is disproportionately criminalized. Notably, the connections *Willow Weep* makes between race, gender, class, and mental illness point out "the dangers of a 'disability essentialism,'" commonly endorsed in

disability studies at the time, "in which the experiences, needs, desires and aims of all disabled people are assumed to be the same" (Mollow 413). Disability essentialism is so problematic because it favors white men's perspectives, effectively wiping out the experiences of people who are marginalized beyond just impairment. Danquah's personal accounts of living with depression depart from the disability essentialism that operates within mental illness discourse and the centering of whiteness as the dominant perspective.

While *Cancer Journals* and *Willow Weep* radically illuminate how intersecting identities shape black women's illness and their experiences in the medical establishment, both texts contend with the way that the Strong Black Woman erases their experiences. In Lorde's *Cancer Journals*, healing doesn't begin and end at the surface level of the body with superficial fixes like medicine and prosthetics. Instead, identity operates at the core of healing. For Lorde, recovery entails taking the time out to truly acknowledge the magnitude of loss-- the loss of her breast, the loss of her formerly normative body—and somehow weaving the pain, the loss, and this newfound disability into a new sense of self. Figuring out how cancer and disability fit into her sense of black womanhood becomes a major source of conflict for Lorde. And performing strength amidst illness comes to disturb her more than the prospect of death. Upon receiving the diagnosis of breast cancer, Lorde details feeling isolated as a sick, black woman. In a series of affirmative statements, she notes, "I have cancer. I'm a black lesbian feminist poet, how am I going to do this now? Where are the models for what I'm supposed to be in this situation? But there were none. This is it, Audre. You're on your own" (Lorde 28**).** The fact that there is no model for a sick black subject reveals the extent to which blackness must appear physically able, whether healthy or not, so much so that subjects like Lorde become misfits, having no community to belong to. Although Lorde has a firm understanding of her identity before breast

cancer, with no black referential models, this illness disrupts her sense of being. The conflict over having a model circles back to the presumed strength of blackness. The idealization of black invulnerability, innately separate from reminders of human fragility like disability, make incorporating sickness into identity difficult.

Although mythic black ability erases Lorde, she ironically positions strength as the only solution to this sense of alienation. When white feminists and black political groups marginalize her disabled, black queer body, Lorde confesses that she doesn't "feel like being strong, but do I have a choice? It hurts when even my sisters look at me in the street with cold and silent eyes. I am defined as other in every group I'm a part of. The outsider, both strength and weakness" (11). As she moves back and forth from one social circle to the next, Lorde's peers praise and stigmatize key parts of identity as "strengths" and "weaknesses." White feminists ostracize her for her race, and black communities alienate her because of her queer sexuality, with both overlooking subjects disenfranchised beyond just race and sex like Lorde. When Lorde refers to herself as both a "strength" and a "weakness," it's unclear whether she is speaking to herself or the communities she aligns with. The way her statement practically refuses interpretation seems to parallel larger communities' inability to read her body. But even as Lorde criticizes these groups, and considers the vulnerability of liminal identity, she placates them with a vow to maintain a quiet sense of strength. While Lorde relies on this strength to survive, it appears to cut short this timely assessment of intra-group discrimination, and the precarious position black women take up in attempting to find a platform and support for their cause amongst white feminists and civil rights groups.

I begin with these two passages from *Cancer Journals* because they illustrate the love-hate relationship that sick black women have with mythic black strength. Black fortitude erases

them and their embodied fragility, and then ironically becomes a way of coping with that erasure. When we take a look at black feminist scholarship, mythic black strength makes vulnerability a difficult subject to approach even for able-bodied black women with no chronic illness. Recent scholarship, like Brittney Cooper's *Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower* (2018) illustrate the discomfort in broaching the topic of fragility. She discusses how implausible the expectations of black strength are, adding nuance to this discourse. Despite the efforts to profile and surveille Cooper on campus, she contends "this is why I'm 'never scared,' as we say in the crunk South. This doesn't mean I'm never afraid. Being never scared has a cultural inflection to it that is about defiance, and about a refusal to be cowed into submission. To be black is to know you are being watched—at all times—anyway" (214). The blunt way that Cooper confesses that she grapples with moments of uncertainty is a humanizing moment that challenges the Strong Black Woman. However, rather than delve into those instances of vulnerability, Cooper goes on to discuss the greater good that performative strength serves in refusing to submit to hegemonic surveillance. Memoirs like Cooper's demonstrate that vulnerability is an unavoidable reality that black feminists don't necessarily deny, but nonetheless refrain from delving into discussion about. Thus, even though Lorde's and Danquah's works were published well over 30 years prior to Cooper, their memoirs are still timely in their honest conversations about both resistance and fear as mutually constitutive.

In the first section, I lay out the standardized model of strength and black womanhood that Lorde and Danquah contend with through their illnesses. I pay particular attention to how the Strong Black Woman dictates how outsiders perceive Lorde's and Danquah's conditions. I intend to show how the authors' experiences with illness lock them out of various communities, both marginalized and mainstream. Additionally, I will consider how the Strong Black Woman, a

figure that emphasizes all the nurturing and laboring aspects of the physical body, makes Lorde's and Danquah's chronically ill bodies indecipherable. In the third section, I consider the ways that Lorde and Danquah reconcile the exploitive historical relationship between the medical establishment and black women to frame their own criticisms of the medical industry. Ultimately, in the closing section I explore how *Willow Weep for Me* and *Cancer Journals* operate within, modify, and anticipate key principles of disability rights activism and the academic field of disability studies. The contrast between the British Social Model (which dictates that society alone disables the impaired) and the disabling anguish Lorde and Danquah experience draws a central concern in this section-- how can disability studies re-define disability, moving away from an externalized notion of impairment in order to incorporate chronic even fatal illnesses, that are painful with or without social barriers? Then, I follow up with the ways that Lorde and Danquah's experiences enable them to establish a unique sense of embodied humanity that places vulnerability and pain at its basis. In both memoirs, the narrators share dream and fantasy sequences in which they perform romanticized roles and acts of black female strength. Both authors slip in and out of earnest reflections on fear and pain and self-imaginings as militant warrior women, challenging corrupt corporate structures or failed heroes expending their bodies to rescue others. I explore later in this chapter how these fantasies don't necessarily rupture explorations of vulnerability as initially conjectured, but instead enable Lorde and Danquah to cultivate an embodied humanity that makes rhetorically encumbered terms like "victim" or "agency," somewhat obsolete. This humanity reveals the ways that traditional notions of black female fortitude from the Strong Black Woman to black feminist empowerment are so freighted that they can't be redeemed for the explicit purposes of each text. I engage black

feminist critics and disability studies critics including Rebecca Wanzo, Jasbir Puar, and Anna Mollow.

Given the 1980s publication era of *Cancer Journals* and the greater acceptance amongst feminist circles of outspoken defiance and fortitude, Lorde doesn't escape the double-bind that the Strong Black Woman creates between suppression and placation, strength and vulnerability. But readers shouldn't expect her to depart from this paradox. In fact, the question shouldn't be whether or not a person can escape these confines, but instead, what tensions does a chronically ill black female subject draw out of this trope differently than an able-bodied woman? *Willow Weep for Me* re-visits the concerns Lorde raises about contending with black strength and illness. Often, when Danquah attempts to discuss the ways that depression makes her vulnerable, the standards of mythic black strength appear to cut these ruminations short. Yet in contrast to Lorde, who uses her cancer to modify an internalized sense of strength, Danquah ultimately discards the Strong Black Woman as a self-destructive fantasy, external to her, in order to arrive at a more complex notion of fortitude grounded in vulnerability. More recent black feminist theory that identifies political saliency in vulnerability echoes Danquah's nuanced thinking about strength. Notably, recent critics like Janell Hobson argue that the vulnerability of victimhood possesses discursive potential that black feminists traditionally have steered clear of. For Hobson, this instinctive move is "away from 'victim' narratives in exchange for ones that assert 'agency.' In speaking, the victim is already an agent, and her narrative is especially threatening because it dares to expose violations and violence when others declare that such oppressions do not exist" (74). According to Hobson, the premium in black feminist theory on stories that transform black women from objects to fully realized, empowered voices simplistically defines agency and victimhood as separate and distinctive, when the two operate hand-in-hand.

Narratives of subjugation can actively provoke and deconstruct naturalized assumptions about victimization rather than illustrate passiveness. Even when black women appear fully victimized, simply articulating their experience exposes racialized and gendered dynamics is a subversive act. Thus, black feminists draw a false binary between vulnerability and agency. Speaking about embodied experience is inherently agential. To depart from Hobson's rationale, Lorde and Danquah draw much-needed attention to the, at times, fatal inequity black female patients face in the medical establishment, thus their concerns with reinforcing trauma are ultimately unfounded. Vulnerability in all its manifestations can provide voice rather than silence. And vulnerability offers greater freedom for black female authors rather than in a one-dimensional sense of empowerment that lends itself so easily to racialized stereotypes. Ultimately, the nuances Danquah teases out of strength and vulnerability in *Willow Weep* should be considered a significant work in more recent black feminist discourse of moving away from romanticized resistance.

II.

Within this section I frame my analysis around the Strong Black Woman and the healthy disabled subject. Historically, disability studies and disability rights activism have idealized the healthy disabled subject and made him into a poster child for their efforts. The healthy disabled subject is often a white heteronormative male who aligns with many of the racialized, gendered, and classed standards in society, with exception to disability, and consequently enjoys many societal privileges. Their impairment is often bodily and visible (i.e. uses a wheelchair, has an amputated limb, etc.) and it doesn't threaten his health. I constructed this chapter around the healthy disabled subject and the Strong Black Woman because they diametrically oppose Lorde's and Danquah's pained bodyminds and become the greatest sources of conflict for the

two. These two distinctive figures seem different, considering that the healthy disabled subject experiences no pain, and anguish related to oppression is a reality that prompts the Strong Black Woman's performance of fortitude. However, I demonstrate in the next two sections that their complete exteriorization is a commonality, that in turn, makes Lorde and Danquah's conditions illegible. The healthy disabled subject's bodily impairment, while visually stigmatizing, completely overshadows those living with chronic illness like Lorde and Danquah. And the Strong Black Woman's ceaseless labor and care for others, with little to no interiority, makes Lorde's and Danquah's ruminations of vulnerability unreadable. The parallels between the healthy disabled subject and the Strong Black Woman here illustrate the lack of inclusion of black women in disability studies, and the lack of consideration of mental illness versus physical impairment. As I argue in this chapter, Danquah's and, by extension, Lorde's memoirs not only call for inclusivity, but beg a re-consideration of how we define black womanhood and disability, and a move away from exteriorizing these identities.

Ultimately, the association of strength with racial authenticity leads to Lorde's and Danquah's erasure within various communities. Notably with Danquah, the false perception of depression as a "white problem" leads others to question her legitimacy as a black woman. Danquah recounts that when she introduces the topic of her depression to others, the responses scrutinize her as an oddity. The colorful range of reactions from family and friends include, "'Girl, you've been hanging out with too many white folk'; 'What do you have to be depressed about? If our people could make it through slavery, we can make it through anything'; 'Take your troubles to Jesus, not no damn psychiatrist'" (Danquah 21) or "'it's just that when black women start going on Prozac, you know the whole world is falling apart'" (20). Regardless of who Danquah discusses her depression with, the pattern of interaction remains the same. She

reveals her bouts with depression to others. In this crucial moment of intimacy, in which Danquah aligns herself with a stigmatized, presumably white illness, her friends and family question her depression or worse reject it and follow up with unsolicited advice. The recommendations vary, from reducing depression to a matter of personal willpower, to suggesting distance from white friends and their assumed self-indulgent neuroses. These reactions don't suggest a problem with Danquah discussing her innermost feelings. After all, the Strong Black Woman is popularly represented as an incredibly passionate emotional figure. However, depression is the *wrong* emotion for Danquah to exhibit. Stereotypes approximate to the Strong Black Woman, like that of the angry black woman, expect black women to have intense emotions. But black women should direct these emotions outwards to a target, rather than inward as depression. What undergirds these well-meaning words of guidance is intolerance for "weak" black women who direct their emotions inward. Because Danquah lacks the resilience to quietly bear her sadness or the boldness to lash out and exert her dominance, others call her validity or "realness" as a black woman into question.

I want to point out that unlike Lorde who is African American, Danquah is a first-generation Ghanaian American. Thus, Danquah's depression both challenges her authenticity as a black woman, and as a Ghanaian American. Danquah's Ghanaian background is prominent in her accounts of her upbringing, and also her interactions with her family. Often times, being too Americanized and unable to fit into Ghanaian culture is a source of conflict for Danquah and a trigger for depressive emotions. Danquah recounts that during a visit from her parents, while she was living in California, she felt so isolated by the cultural barrier between them and ridiculed because of her lack of cultural fluency, that she broke down at dinner one night. Danquah mentions how steadfastly she tries to remain "stoic and nonresponsive, I hoped to disprove my

parents' accusations that I had become too Americanized. Before I could stop myself though, I started sobbing hysterically over my meal…I had only proved them right. I was melodramatic, thin-skinned and whiny, just like their image of the average American" (34). Danquah constructs a divide between Ghanaian culture and American culture and positions herself as the misfit standing between these two extremes. On the one hand, Ghanaian culture favors decorum that closely parallels the Strong Black Woman, in that Danquah is expected to be stern and unyielding to any external factors or internal strife. On the other hand, American culture by contrast is associated with excess emotional expression to the point of appearing insincere and weak. Americans, and those firmly entrenched in American culture like Danquah, are perceived as the antithesis to Ghanaian culture and, within the framework of this dissertation, the Strong Black Woman as they are unable to withstand difficult times. Thus, depression invalidates Danquah's racial authenticity as a black American, and as a Ghanaian.

While friends and family champion the ideals of the Strong Black Woman, Danquah likens the figure to the Mammy:

> The one myth that I have had to endure my entire life is that of my supposed birthright to strength. Black women are supposed to be strong—caretakers, nurturers, healers of other people any of the twelve variations of a Mammy. Emotional hardship is supposed to be built into the structures of our lives. It went along with the territory of being both black and woman in a society that undervalues the lives of black people and regards all women as second-class citizens. (19)

Danquah locates the originary point of the Strong Black Woman in the Mammy. Many critics[22] have written extensively about the Mammy and note that this figure was constructed for mainstream amusement. Sue K. Jewell goes as far as to say that the initial purpose of the Mammy was to assuage white guilt. She writes that this figure was:

> Developed in the South by the privileged class during slavery, in which the physical and emotional makeup of enslaved women was used to justify the institution of slavery. This image is of an obese, dark, and middle-aged domestic servant… Because of her physical appearance, size, perpetual grin, and comportment she is viewed as humorous and comedic— as asexual and the antithesis of American standards of beauty and femininity…although fiercely independent and cantankerous, she is a faithful servant who is devoted to ensuring that all of the needs of the family for whom she works are continuously met, and she never demands anything for herself. She is docile in her relationship with whites but exhibits aggressiveness toward African Americans, a quality not defined as feminine. (170-171)

The mammy embodies masculinized black maternalism. The white family she serves adores her for her selfless work, and her own family often despises her for her domineering harshness and neglect. Essentialism greatly informs the mammy as her blackness dictates her diligent work ethic and brashness. And these characteristics in turn validate the otherness of her race. For Danquah, this strength manifests externally, in selfless labor and service to others, and internally as steadfast emotional resolve. Outsiders' social expectation for black women to perform strength suggests an implicit understanding of the racial and gendered marginalization

[22] For further discussion on the Mammy, see Hill Collins 69-96 and Harris 21-39.

black women encounter. However, the way black women must be an emotional bedrock for others turns these barriers into a matter of willpower and personal responsibility. The exceptionalism of the Strong Black Woman does this same work. The Strong Black Woman may draw attention to inequality, but her seeming superhuman abilities work around and past obstacles of racism, sexism, and ableism, providing no sense of urgency or no need to remove these obstacles.

Ultimately, friends and family member's reactions to Danquah's depression harbor a conviction in racialized realness, the proverbial heartbeat of black strength. I understand realness as a classed term, synonymous with the "common," "working" folk, and a popular cultural fallacy akin to black coolness. Like coolness, being "real" is a desirable quality born out of class struggle that black subjects allegedly have a birthright to. Realness problematically conflates blackness with poverty and assumes that common black folk are more genuine than the wealthy. Thus, black people who possess this sought-after realness should take it as a consolation for the structural and institutional factors that create such a large divide between the working class and the wealthy.

The term realness implies both an endurance and inheritance of tribulation from enslaved ancestors, who exist as the ultimate benchmark of black authenticity and suffering in American memory. Rebecca Wanzo argues that "chattel slavery" is embedded in cultural memory as "the epitome of black suffering from which African Americans could only demonstrate progress. American rhetoric is filled with demands that citizens recognize their power to overcome oppression" (63). According to Wanzo, linear notions of progress suggest that African American descendants should have surpassed the unparalleled suffering their enslaved ancestors endured in order to establish a better socioeconomic position for themselves. I would also assert that the

torment enslaved persons experienced additionally becomes a standard of authenticity. The physical, mental, and emotional turmoil of chattel slavery become an uncompromising standard that descendants must live up to. In other words, if black American ancestors survived the worst of humanity, black people in the present day can handle the, trivial by comparison, difficulties of the modern world. This flawed revisionist history completely ignores the laws put in place after slavery to maintain its labor structure, consequently making the experiences of enslaved ancestors and their descendants not all that different. Nonetheless, the myth of black authenticity, in all its limited essentialism, dictates that descendants of the African diaspora, in inheriting this legacy, not only acquire "realness" grounded in struggle, but this strength and authenticity somehow distinguishes them from white people. According to such standards of "realness," Danquah appears inauthentically black for articulating her depression and seeking professional help.

While family and peers may reject depressed or chronically sick black women and label them weak, the long-suffering black woman, one of the only reference models for black female depression in the memoir, is a universally embraced cultural touchstone. Anguished black women like troubled jazz singer, Billie Holiday, was just as famous for her well-documented bouts with depression and drug abuse as she was for her iconic music, which exploited her suffering for doting audiences. The cultural acceptance of the long-suffering black woman almost suggests that black women's travails are only palatable if they are solemnly taken up like a burden or turned into entertainment for others**.** I define the long-suffering black woman as an iteration of the Strong Black Woman; however, the Strong Black Woman overcomes strife to inspire, while the long-suffering black woman endures ceaseless anguish. This culturally normalized and persistent pain characterizes both the long-suffering woman and the metaphoric

weeping willow in Danquah's memoir. As their pain is stripped of its linkage to mental illness, structural inequality, and other social issues that plague many black women, their anguish becomes a commodity. Blues performances, for instance, illustrate this naturalization of black female pain. Black women consequently become objects of suffering, who serve the needs of a historically white audience for the sake of cathartic release. The entertaining spectacle the suffering black woman presents, and her potential marketability distinguish her from the maligned depressed subject**.**

Danquah's metaphoric use of the weeping willow tree yields insight about the cultural trope of black women's suffering, and also her apprehension about discussing anguish**.** Danquah observes how the willow tree is both fragile, yet commanding and grand. She recalls lamenting as a child "that a tree so beautifully delicate and regal like the willow should be forever associated with tears…From that day forward, each time I saw a willow tree I wished it and all who had wept beneath its branches joy. I thought to do this not because I didn't know profound sadness at 10…It was that I believed such sadness could be overcome" (Danquah 47). For Danquah, the tragedy of the willow tree is that poets and artists ignore its elegance and transform it into an archetype for sorrow. Just as the willow tree's beauty has become synonymous with melancholy, mythic strength has erased the nuances of black women's experiences. By making the weeping willow the central metaphor of the memoir, Danquah attempts to recover these misunderstood bodies and take back narrative control in defining and presenting them to readers. However, in recalling the process of developing the final title, *Willow Weep for Me*, Danquah seems to ponder whether or not the discourse on black women's victimization is too extensive to retrieve and re-imagine. In considering the extent that the title's reference to a song from Holiday

will provoke a reading of black women as pitiable victims, Danquah writes that 'Willow Weep for Me':

> Not only invoked Billie Holiday's image and the tragedy that was her life, it also called attention to the necessity of the long over-due inclusion of black women in discussion about depression. While writing, I started to rethink this title. It seemed to suggest that black women were victims. I wanted a title that would reflect the courage, devotion, and resilience that it takes to contend with depression. (262)

Willow Weep for Me evokes the imagery of the weeping willow tree and the popular jazz standard from Holiday. Despite the possible morbidity of the title, after a conversation with a friend about the medicinal use of the willow as "a healing herb," Danquah decides to keep the metaphor to demonstrate how black women, as she puts it, are not "'victims, [but] survivors'" (262). In this moment, what seems to disturb Danquah more than the thin line between the depressed subject and the long-suffering black woman is the underlying vulnerability that both figures entail. She is so anxious about titling her work "Willow Weep for Me" for fear that just by gesturing towards that trove of pain, she will symbolically victimize black women as a whole. While this apprehension certainly alludes to issues of self-representation within black American literary discourse, what seems so hazardous about vulnerability is how easily it can shift into demoralizing victimhood. The slipperiness of vulnerability speaks to the ways that the mainstream public reads black women as imperfect victims in contrast to white women. Black women exist outside the protective boundaries that allow white women to be vulnerable and believed as victims. Consequently, black victimhood often becomes a space for further scapegoating and demonization. Rather than sit in this uncomfortable space, and consider the implications of this tension between vulnerability and victimhood, within a couple of sentences,

Danquah bypasses this complication altogether and frontloads strength, arguing that the weeping willow embodies the "courage, devotion, and resilience that it takes to contend with depression" (262). When Danquah finds herself in a quandary over the politics of self-representation, she reverts to the language of strength, when throughout the text, she highlights how this caricature burdens her efforts to recover from clinical depression. Her emphasis on resiliency almost erases the nuances of her conversation about the ties between black victimhood and survival.

Lorde expresses a similar frustration with the cultural perception of black women as strong. In a series of entries that document what Lorde refers to as "the process of integrating the crisis [of mastectomy] into my life" (8), she finds herself unable to reflect on the pain of her single mastectomy because of the stories she sees every day of brutality enacted on black women, and society's indifference to it all. Lorde writes, "What is this work all for? What does it matter whether I ever speak again or not? I try. The blood of black women sloshes from coast to coast and [Mary] Daly says race is of no concern to women. So that means we are either immortal or born to die and no note taken, un-women" (10). Lorde's poetic meditation on the sheer volume of black female victims across the country openly accuses white feminists of failing black women. Furthermore, this commentary demonstrates the stakes of the Strong Black Woman. The cultural belief that black women can withstand any tragedy ultimately contributes to this overwhelming sense of apathy to black women's suffering or as Lorde writes, gross bloodshed from coast to coast. Society's inaction raises an ontological question of who black women are, and who they are perceived to be.

While Lorde criticizes mythic black strength, she prioritizes voice in a way that gives sick women two options—they can remain silent and submit to the will of hegemony, or they can speak about their experiences and resist hegemony. Voice, more specifically, discovering critical

voice and articulating gendered and racialized experiences with breast cancer, all drive *Cancer Journals*. Lorde often notes that she wrote *Cancer Journals* for discursive purposes because "our feelings need voice in order to be recognized, respected, and of use…imposed silence about any area of our lives is a tool for separation and powerlessness" (9). With her turn to first-person collective in her use of "our feelings," Lorde makes a call to action for readers to put their experiences with breast cancer on the page because the opposite alternative—remaining silent—is much more destructive by comparison. Throughout *Cancer Journals* Lorde emphasizes the destructive nature of silence. For Lorde, because black women have been shut out of language, from writing to public speaking, they are obligated to turn their experiences with hegemonic structures, like the medical industry, into words that readers and listeners discuss, share, and externalize because as she famously writes, "my silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you" from subjugation (18). In the feminist tradition of acknowledging the political potential in personal experiences with sexism, Lorde argues that something as innocuous as our intimate emotions can build community. While the Strong Black Woman erases depressed subjects like Danquah, and silences their voices, Lorde seems to harness this figure in order to find her own voice in the medical infrastructure as an outspoken, resistant patient. She seems to implicitly argue that your experiences with illness serve little discursive power if you don't direct those inner experiences outward into pointed criticism. Although voice is key to resistance in *Cancer Journals* and *Willow Weep for Me*, both texts interestingly struggle with using language to fully embody experiences.

Throughout *Willow Weep*, Danquah describes her early bouts with depression, and while she vividly details the physical and mental toll of the disease, she struggles with defining the condition. For Danquah, giving a name to depression is key to making the illness distinctive

from her and consequently wielding some control over it. Before Danquah can give a name to her experiences of depression, she details how it turned mundane tasks like getting out of bed or going outside into challenges. While readers can get a clear sense of what depression does-- the grip that it has over Danquah's life—what depression is constantly eludes definition. When Danquah attempts to define depression, she resorts to metaphoric language, describing it as "a strange and terrifying space of sadness and then, into a cobweb of fatigue. I gradually lost my ability to function. It would take me hours to get up out of bed, get bathed, put clothes on" (27). At a decisive moment where Danquah attempts to succinctly define depression, she instead uses gloomy, almost Gothic metaphors and approximations to describe depression as a "cobweb of fatigue" and a "terrifying space of sadness." Danquah's employment of a Gothic tone gestures towards the alienation and hyper-individuation of protagonists within this genre and suggests a linkage between the ordeal Gothic characters undergo and her experiences with depression. In this moment Danquah becomes a troubled Gothic heroine of sorts, tormented by her own personal hell. On the one hand, the difficulty of articulating depression dovetails with the Gothic theme of melancholy. Christine Berthin points out that the melancholy tone of Gothic literature taps into fears and emotions that exist outside of language. She reasons that Gothic melancholy is a longing for an "immemorial past…the once familiar and now forgotten life before language and socialization, when there were no boundaries, no subjects and no object. Melancholy crypts and regressive fantasies might well be what hollows out language in the Gothic" (Berthin 87). On the other hand, considering that Gothicism frequently idealized white male genius as mentally ill and misunderstood, Danquah seems to insert herself into a genre historically shut off from black women in a similar way that mentally ill black subjects are criminalized and cut off from the romantic narratives of mental illness that white subjects so often receive.

Danquah connects key moments in her journey with depression to her intimate, lived experiences as a black American, virtually discovering the language of depression within a racialized context. One of the earliest instances where Danquah identifies previously unarticulated feelings as depression was during her time in Los Angeles immediately after the trial verdict concerning Rodney King.[23] I highlight Danquah's reflections on the Rodney King trial because although she recalls living with depression for the majority of her life, she experiences an awakening during the fallout of the trial. Danquah mentions that when the cops who beat King were found innocent, she felt that "all black people, had…been told that our lives were of no value …When would Korama [Danquah's daughter] and I—when would any black people ever be able to find peace or happiness in this world…I wanted to cry but the tears would not come …This is how the world feels to me when I am depressed" (42). The Rodney King trial is one of the more infamous moments in recent collective memory that shored up racial divides. On the one hand this case tapped into the stereotype of menacing black masculinity. On the other hand, the trial affirmed African Americans' historically negative relationship to authoritative institutions like the police force and divided the nation. Unlike previous instances of police brutality, the Rodney King trial was particularly noteworthy because a bystander captured it on camera. The ironic contrast here of having physical evidence in the trial, which failed to affirm the experiences of many black citizens, poetically dovetails with Danquah's own experience of depression, and her inability to produce the physical evidence (in this case tears) to validate her innermost feelings. The juxtaposition of the Rodney King trial with Danquah's

[23] Rodney King was brutally beaten by the LAPD during a traffic stop in the 1990s.

personal experience demonstrates the inextricable bonds between black interiority and the bigger issues of the external world that African American writers have discussed for generations.

The depression that Danquah so poignantly describes additionally echoes David Eng's concept of racial melancholia, which intersects "everyday conflicts and struggles with experiences of immigration, assimilation, and racialization" with the mourning and loss commonly associated with death (669). Racial melancholia demonstrates that regular racial devaluation devastates the spirit as much as the emotional grief of death. Where Eng originally connected this term to the experiences of Asian Americans, I extend it to describe the ordeal that black Americans like Danquah endure. Danquah ties her intimate self-discovery to one of the lower points in contemporary African American history. In so doing, she demonstrates that the injustices that persist in larger society negatively affect the intimate, inner world of black Americans. By tying the impetus of her journey with depression to a racially polarizing moment in contemporary American history, Danquah furthers one of the most groundbreaking claims of *Willow Weep*: that mental illness isn't only inextricably bound to race, but that racism literally makes black subjects sick. This argument demonstrates the long-standing effects of racism for black subjects. More importantly, this claim contradicts the idealization of excessively able blackness. Although longstanding tropes like the Strong Black Woman present blackness as stalwart, Danquah implies that black subjects and mental illness are inextricably bound to one another. To clarify, I'm not suggesting that black people are deviant or worse, innately inferior, but that archetypes of black strength force subjects like Danquah to work at an exceptional level despite persistent, racially induced mental trauma.

Lorde similarly reverts to ambiguous, metaphoric language to articulate her experiences with breast cancer. In a journal entry, she describes the despondency she experienced after her

mastectomy as “a pale cloud waiting to consume me, engulf me like another cancer, swallow me into immobility, metabolize me into cells of itself; my body, a barometer” (Lorde 10). Interestingly, Lorde describes her bodymind as both a barometer. And the disruptive weather that the barometer measures as despair, violently devours her bodymind and turns her into the particles of a storm. The personification of ethereal bodies (the description of a cloud digesting Lorde like a person), and the tension here between constancy and turmoil possibly captures the anxiety around the bodymind’s volatility, and how easily it shifts from a deceptively stable entity to chaos. Lorde’s corporeal language is often metaphoric and approximate in parallel to Danquah’s descriptions of depression. While Danquah focuses on trying to define her impairment through language separate from herself, Lorde’s metaphors try to make sense of how impairment impacts her bodymind and therefore impacts her intrinsic sense of identity.

While Danquah makes racial identity the basis for fully comprehending and articulating depression in *Willow Weep*, Lorde moves away from the bodymind towards an interiorized sense of self as the foundation for identity. This process of transitioning from the exterior to one’s own inner world nonetheless entails some extent of violence and grief that parallels racial melancholia. The many declarative “I am” statements we see throughout *Cancer Journals* emphasize the importance of being, yet also the harrowing process of arriving at a fully realized sense of self. Some instances of this ontological theme include Lorde’s reference to “my consciousness as a woman, a black lesbian feminist mother lover poet all I am” (24) or her assertion that “yes I am completely self-referenced right now because it is the only translation I can trust, and I do believe not until every woman traces her weave back strand by bloody self-referenced strand, will we begin to alter the whole pattern” (9). The excessive use of the phrase “I am” symbolizes the extent that Lorde grapples with establishing a new sense of self while

living with cancer. This process is particularly violent and grievous because it requires contending with the "whole pattern…the design of who [you are] and how [your] life has been lived" (Lorde 7). Healing from breast cancer isn't merely a surface-level bodily experience of medical intervention. The subject is essentially required to deal with the disorder of the self.

III.

As I mentioned towards the beginning of the chapter, *Cancer Journals* and *Willow Weep* are not only personal accounts of experiences with depression and breast cancer, but also masterfully crafted critiques of the medical establishment. In Eli Clare's *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure* (2017), he defines the vast network of the healthcare industry, collectively referred to as the medical industrial complex, as "the reigning authority over our body-minds…It shapes our understandings of health and well-being, disability and disease…It diagnoses, treats, and manages the human life cycle as a series of medical events: birth, puberty, pregnancy, menopause, aging, and death, each with its own medicine" (Clare 69). Clare's medical industrial complex parallels the Foucauldian theorization of nearly omniscient power dispersed across every aspect of a person's public and private life. The healthcare industry is both physical and immaterial, and consciously and unconsciously internalized and reinforced by divergent subjects holding various stakes of power. The healthcare industry standardizes major life events like birth and death into medical documentation and synthesizes our lives into measurable, linear markers like the body mass index. The medical industry doesn't only evaluate and categorize bodies with limiting labels like "normal," "disabled" or "diseased," but because of its ubiquity, it unconsciously shapes our perceptions of others. I begin this section with Clare's definition of the medical industrial complex to demonstrate that healthcare spaces go far beyond healing and rehabilitation. The parallels between the healthcare system and oppressive systems like prison

are uncanny and consequently explain how hospitals and doctor offices can become punitive, racializing spaces for black women.

The massiveness of the healthcare industry would lead to an impulsive reading of *Cancer Journals* and *Willow Weep* as fully resistant texts that challenge the authority of the medical establishment. Lorde and Danquah certainly highlight the racism and sexism they experience in this space, which I will explore in greater detail in this section. And as I mentioned in the previous section, Lorde centralizes a bold, resistant voice reminiscent of the Strong Black Woman in *Cancer Journals.* Scholars like Jasbir Puar have criticized this impulse in intersectional feminist writing towards resistance and attribute its persistence to the prioritizing of identity. Puar comments that "intersectionality always produces an Other, and that Other is always a Woman of Color (now on referred to as WOC, to underscore the overdetermined emptiness of its gratuitousness), who must invariably be shown to be resistant, subversive, or articulating a grievance" (52). Puar's argument reflects a larger sense of fatigue within the field towards identity politics, and a desire to move towards post-structural approaches to criticism. Puar, like many scholars, claims that the focus in feminist writing on intersectional identity fails to offer women of color any way out of the white-racial Other binary. If anything, challenging hegemonic structures head-first in writing only buys in to predictable roles of resistance, and doubles down on this binary.

Black feminist critics have voiced similar concerns about the Strong Black Woman and the ways this figure seems to ironically reinforce rather than agitate the status quo. Notably, Lorde, in an interview with Adrienne Rich, recounts teaching poetry to a black studies class at the historically black Tougaloo College, and the conversations repeatedly circling back to the point that "'we need strong black people'- but what they were also saying was that their ideas of

what strong was had come from our oppressors and didn't jibe with their feelings at all" (721). Trudier Harris echoes this same sentiment that conventional notions of black strength come from the center rather than the black collective. She contends that "from the vantage point of slavery and the history of black women's caregiving and other roles in relation to white Americans…such images would have been constructed to soothe the constructors" (Harris 2). Although Lorde and Harris exemplify the intersectional feminism Puar takes issue with, they put forth a similar argument about embodied resistance. According to Lorde and Harris, our most cherished presentations of emboldened, black strength come out of white mass media. Furthermore, these popular images originally existed to diminish white guilt over past racial injustices like chattel slavery (Harris 8). Regardless of the rationale, Lorde and Harris echo Puar's sentiment, that when the victimized resist, they perform a notion of strength that ironically assuages the victimizer.

I agree to an extent with Puar's argument about the limitations of intersectional criticism. While this approach does the important work of holding institutions accountable, intersectionality identity politics can become at times restrictive in the solutions and ways out of subordination. Solely focusing on the consequences of intersecting systems of oppression, and our positionality cannot always imagine possibilities beyond the present moment. However, disability spares Lorde and Danquah from reiterating the stereotype of the resistant Other that Puar warns of. Disability complicates the predictable performance of the resistant Other. Lorde and Danquah openly hold the medical industry accountable, yet the urgency of needing and seeking treatment from the very establishment that considers them an after-thought, complicates the dynamics. It's difficult to engage in full-fledged rebellion against medical authorities, when that authority provides care and treatment. There's a great sense of vulnerability in needing help

from the authority that you cite issue with; that isn't necessarily the case when the resisting subject is able-bodied. As patients in the medical system, Lorde and Danquah complicate the often-predictable role of the resisting person of color and demonstrate how the relationship between the Other and authority within the center isn't always binary. As I will demonstrate in the closing section, rather than promote a romanticized ideal of resistance, Lorde and Danquah navigate the medical establishment by honing a self-awareness grounded in disability. In this section I want to consider the masterful arguments Lorde and Danquah make about the underlying racism and sexism of the medical industry. But more importantly, I want to consider how they move away from our expectations of protest and challenge the predominance of exteriority in disability studies and the medical world.

In *Cancer Journals,* Lorde famously highlights breast cancer as a feminist issue, and the breast cancer treatment industry as a major perpetrator of sexism. She notes that breast cancer treatment and rehabilitation mostly focus on women's physical appearance. Doctors and physical therapists encourage women to undergo surgery and prosthesis to return to what their bodies were prior to cancer in order to re-establish some sense of normalcy. She writes that "the emphasis upon physical pretense…encourages women to dwell in the past rather than a future. This prevents a woman from assessing herself in the present, and from coming to terms with the changed planes of her own …she must mourn the loss of her breast in secret, as if it were the result of some crime of which she were guilty" (Lorde 58).Throughout her cancer journey, Lorde gives priority to accepting how her bodymind has changed, and integrating the loss of her breast into a newfound identity rather than denying this impairment and masking her missing breast. In many regards, Lorde's desire to accept her impaired bodymind as a positive rather than a tragic experience and reject doctor's suggestions of prosthesis anticipates disability pride. Throughout

Cancer Journals Lorde struggles to incorporate the loss of her breast into a new sense of self, but her amputation becomes an additional issue in the external world as Lorde argues with medical staff about how to present her newly changed bodymind. Medical professionals encourage her to camouflage her amputation, while she wants to refrain from wearing any prosthetic or getting cosmetic surgery, which the staff reason is "'bad for the morale of the office'" and other cancer patients (60). Gendered respectability politics--the myth that women can enjoy some level of social capital, while still adhering to a system that subjugates them, if they maintain a demure appearance--underlies the backlash that Lorde receives. What's ironic about the hospital's policing of Lorde's bodymind is that her primary 'offense' isn't risqué clothing and showing off parts of her body socially deemed inappropriate but showing off absent parts of her body. The conflation of normativity with gendered, moralistic notions of modesty deviates from the popular presentation of disabled women as de-sexualized, not desiring anyone, and not being desired by anyone. However, this conflation still suggests that ideal womanhood presents normalcy, even if this normalcy is a prosthetic.

The stress that medical professionals place on appearance highlights one of Lorde's major contentions with the space. Instead of addressing the psychological impact of breast cancer, Lorde writes that the breast cancer industry "insist[s] to every woman who has lost a breast that she is no different from before…a woman after surgery is allowed no time or space within which to weep, rage, internalize, and transcend her own loss. She is left no space to come to terms with her altered life, not to transform it into another level of dynamic existence" (64). The resistance Lorde receives because of her refusal to wear a prosthetic suggests that the tragedy of amputation isn't the loss of your previous embodied identity as Lorde envisions but the loss of your former appearance. The priority in post-mastectomy rehabilitation on

reconstructing the body and returning it to its previous state reinforces women's gendered role as sexualized objects and suggests that breast cancer is only a matter of aesthetics. Lorde argues that the "insistence upon breast prostheses as 'decent' rather than functional is an additional example of that wipe-out of self in which women are constantly encouraged to take part. I am personally affronted by the message that I am only acceptable if I look 'right' or 'normal,' where those norms have nothing to do with my own perceptions of who I am" (66). For Lorde, breast cancer treatment reiterates the sexist presumption that a woman's value is in how she presents her physical body to the world rather than her interior sense of self.

While medical professionals vehemently protest Lorde's amputated bodymind, Danquah's discussion of the racialized undertones of mental illness discourse reveals how mental health spaces wholly lock out black patients. For Danquah, the mental health industry ultimately reflects the larger discourse of white supremacy. Danquah cites blackness as a prominent metaphor in mental illness discourse and colloquialisms, whether we consider euphemisms that describe depression as a "black hole" or an "enveloping darkness" (22). Ultimately, Danquah asks the readers, "what does darkness mean to me, a woman who has spent her life surrounded by it? The darkness of my skin; the darkness of my friends and family. I have never been afraid of the dark. It poses no harm to me. What is the color of my depression?" (22). Black people and, by extension, metaphors about blackness hover around and inform the conversation on depression. The discourse on depression closes out black patients, but nonetheless these conversations depend on metaphors of blackness to articulate white patients' experiences. The way that practitioners and theorists make blackness stand in for the worst aspects of depression raises the question of how a black patient can find space for themselves in an industry that locks them out rhetorically.

Race not only informs the discourse of depression, but it determines the perception of mental illness from subject to subject. Ultimately, black mentally ill subjects are adversely criminalized in contrast to their white counterparts because of longstanding rhetoric that demonizes blackness. According to Danquah:

> the mental illness that affects white men is often characterized, if not glamorized as a sign of genius…as if their depression is somehow heroic. White women who suffer from mental illness is depicted as idle, spoiled or just plain hysterical. Black men are demonized and pathologized. Black women…are certainly not seen as geniuses…when a black woman suffers from a mental disorder, the overwhelming opinion is that she is weak. And weakness in black women is intolerable. (20)

The way that the signification of mental illness changes from body to body, radically demonstrates how our understandings of race connect to our perceptions of impairment. As white mental illness is not only tolerated, but romanticized, disability seems to reify racialized and gendered stereotypes. When we consider historical figures like Vincent Van Gogh, Sylvia Plath, and Virginia Woolf who often publicly dealt with depression, mental illness for these figures becomes a muse that maximizes underlying talents. Yet, mental illness makes black people, who are already perceived as problem bodies, completely intolerable, and incompatible with the social fabric. Mental illness affirms white fears of black men as predators, and strips black women of their naturalized "birthright" as strong laborers.

These racialized differences in perceptions of mental illness lead to the criminalization of black subjects living with mental illness. Just as Lorde noted that a difficulty to having breast cancer was not having any models to reference, Danquah frequently comments on the difficulty of finding narratives that reflect her and her peers' experiences as black women beyond

criminality. The contrast between the varied, lived experiences with depression, and the overwhelmingly white public representation of it, leads Danquah to a profound assertion:

> Depressive disorders do not discriminate along color lines, people do. People determine what is publicly acceptable and what is not…and these social mores spill over into our private lives…White people take prescription drugs with gentle, melodic names; they go to therapy…Black people take illicit drugs…We build churches…We are the walking wounded. And we suffer alone because we don't know that there are others like us. (183-184)

Ultimately, race and mental illness not only inform one another, but their intersection exacerbates the difficulties black subjects face in a racist and ableist society. Even though depression affects various people regardless of race, race affects treatment. White depression is feminized. Sympathetic, nurturing care characterizes the drugs, therapy, and social treatment, even though the prescription drug industry that Danquah sarcastically refers to produces narcotics as addictive as illegal drugs. In contrast, depression is isolating for black people. Critics like Wanzo affirm that the consistent characteristic of "medical discourse" is the discriminatory attitude and treatment of black women "as 'strong black women,' medical malingerers, and drug seekers" (149). In comparison to Danquah's friends and family who fail to acknowledge her interiority, the mental health industry similarly reduces black subjects to a caricature of black criminality, instead of investing care into their inner worlds. Danquah is virtually stranded in *Willow Weep* with no outlets to confide in.

As Danquah finds herself a willing participant in the mental health industry, actively seeking therapy for her depression, she criticizes the way this structure disregards her emotional needs. In parallel to her musings on how the reception of depression changes from subject to

subject, Danquah circles back to the issue of definition and language and considers how the mental health industry depersonalizes her experiences. When Danquah finds out that her therapist, a trainee she's been seeing for several months, has become a licensed therapist and is moving to a private practice where her services are exponentially higher, she ponders the futility of her progress. Danquah asks, how do you define the relationship between patient and therapist when patients are easily shifted around like pawns? More importantly:

> How exactly does one mourn the loss of one's therapist? It's not like losing a friend or a lover. There is nothing to validate the emptiness that you feel inside, no poems, no songs on the radio, no made-for-TV specials. When you think about it, there is nothing really to affirm the depth of the relationship you once had or, that it was even a relationship at all…Generally, therapy is treated as a paid association, an agreement, not an authentic human relationship. So what if your therapist gets ill, takes a new position elsewhere, or drops dead? Big deal. Take your Kleenex, your checkbook, your dysfunctions, and go find another therapist. That was the message everyone seemed to be sending me. (Danquah 210)

Language again becomes a paramount part of shaping reality and experience. If there are no models or creative outlets to illustrate the relationship between therapist and patient, or if there is no language to articulate that bond, then its plausibility and the subject's perceptions of this relationship become dubious. The relationship becomes more of a phantom than a reality. Ultimately, the capitalistic transformation of the bond between the practitioner and the patient into a reciprocal exchange of cash for labor might be why genuine relationships are imperceptible in therapy. Whereas capitalism has historically exploited black women's bodies and labor for free, in this instance, even as Danquah attempts to become a buyer in the "market,"

the market still financially locks her out of this exchange. Although Danquah lacks the currency to become an active participant in the mental health industry, her illumination of this profession's hypocrisies challenges the callous abandonment of black female patients and their emotional needs.

IV.

In a contemporary context, where disability is now considered an aspect of identity, Danquah's clinical depression and Lorde's amputation would classify them as disabled. However, in their memoirs, neither identify as disabled, nor do they align themselves with disability rights efforts. Although Lorde and Danquah don't identify as disabled, they make observations about the structural causes of their impairment and the stakes of cure that parallel key sentiments within disability studies. In fact, just as I argued in chapter one that there is a well-documented discourse on grotesque embodiment in black feminist theory, I would situate *Cancer Journals* and *Willow Weep* amongst the many black women writers who discuss disabled embodiment and its intersections with race and gender, without using explicit terminology of disability studies. As I will argue in this section, by discussing the anguish of their impairments, Lorde and Danquah make a huge departure from efforts within disability studies to reverse the stigma of disability. I hope to prove that the contrast between the pain Danquah and Lorde illustrate and the frontloading of non-fatal, and non-painful healthy disability within disability studies results from the theme of exteriority. Black women have historically been exteriorized as possessing all body with little to no interiority and demonized for this presumption as a result. Yet, in a space like disability studies where exteriorization garners a type of capital and visibility, black women like Danquah get left out of the conversation. While a cross-pollination would seem unlikely, I want to demonstrate that chronically ill black women are overlooked in

disability studies in favor of healthy disabled subjects to the same extent that the Strong Black woman invalidates all disabled black women. Ironically, an intolerance for black female impairment leads to their erasure in both spaces.

In *Willow Weep*, Danquah rejects ableist understandings of sickness and consequently echoes disability studies principles. The publishing period of *Willow Weep* witnessed an upswing in disability memoirs. Despite the number and variety of personal stories about impairment, G.T. Couser identifies subjecthood as a universal characteristic. According to Couser, "disabled people counter their historical objectification (or even abjection) by occupying the subject position. The representation of disability in such narratives is thus a political as well as a mimetic act—a matter of speaking for as well as speaking about" (7). Early disability memoirs centered the perspective of an outsider looking in at disability. That's to say, the parents of disabled subjects, caregivers, and medical practitioners wrote early texts focusing on the journey to diagnosis and the hardship of caring for loved ones with impairment, which (whether intentional or not) position the disabled as a problem with no interiority. To counter the popular objectification of the disabled, memoirists focused on taking back narrative control in defining impairment. In usurping narrative voice, the objective of memoirs then became humanizing the disabled, and shifting away from the popular portrayal of disabled subjects as infantile charity cases, at best, and grotesque spectacles, at worst. Although Danquah doesn't make it a part of her project to establish her humanity to the readers as a disabled subject, she nonetheless rejects many of the stereotypes that objectify the disabled. For instance, Danquah refuses to present depression as a pitiable misfortune. Furthermore, she doesn't fetishize cure as the desired end point in her story either. *Willow Weep* doesn't focus on assuring readers that depression can be cured, and that Danquah's story is miraculous evidence of such. Rather the text promotes

awareness of how mental illness affects people of color and encourages readers to self-diagnose and take the necessary steps to seek out treatment. Danquah seems to adapt a disability studies agenda in placing some agency in the depressed subject, rather than the psychiatrist, to not only tell their own story from their perspective but direct the treatment they receive.

In a similar vein, Lorde's emphasis on the environmental factors causing breast cancer echoes rights groups' protests of the medical model. The medical model is the master narrative on bodily variety and dictates that disability is merely a matter of physical illness, and a personal problem. Susan Wendell points out that this "identification of disability with illness" is problematic because it leads to the "medicalization of disability… as an individual misfortune" (161). For disability studies critics and scholars, the medical model problematically stigmatizes impairment as a personal setback. Under this model, the disabled subject becomes a problem bodymind who must shoulder keep up with able-bodied society despite impairment, and seek cure at all costs, even if it means death. At the time Lorde wrote *Cancer Journals*, and even today, the media still frequently situates breast cancer within the medical model as an individual problem and a matter of personal lifestyle choices like diet or choosing to not have children. In all actuality, according to Lorde, these assertions ignore the larger role that "exposures to chemical or physical agents in the environment" play in cancer (75). Lorde rejects the argument that breast cancer is a personal problem to be dealt with privately. Instead, breast cancer is a by-product of society—specifically, class stratification-- as the working class are exposed and affected by pollutants and toxins at exponentially high rates. Lorde ultimately anticipates the British social model of disability, the very bedrock of disability studies, which argues that impairment isn't inherently disabling. Instead, society disables individuals with impairment by enforcing access barriers, discriminatory legislation, etc.

While Lorde and Danquah highlight the structural factors behind impairment, they depart from disability studies, in their emphasis on the sheer agony of living with chronic illness. Physical and mental anguish are constants in both texts. Danquah at one point confides to the readers, "Depression was all about, suffering…To suffer is to feel pain, to sustain an unbearable condition; it is also to be disadvantaged. (237). After her mastectomy, Lorde details how she was wracked with "fixed pains, and moveable pains, deep pains and surface pains, strong pains and weak pains… I would think, 'what do I eat? how do I act to announce or preserve my new status as temporary upon this earth?' and then I'd remember that we have always been temporary, and that I had just never really underlined it before, or acted out of it so completely before" (52). The repetition of "pains" becomes difficult to read, thusly capturing how exhaustive and numbing the anguish after her mastectomy is. Even though the surgery riddles Lorde with anguish, in a poetic sense, it becomes an opportunity for her to acknowledge her own mortality. Furthermore, when Lorde reflects on her apprehensions about even writing a memoir on cancer, much of her trepidation connects back to fears of reliving the pain. She explains that she experienced "a reluctance to deal with myself…a reluctance to living or re-living, giving life or new life to that pain. The pain of separation from my breast was at least as sharp as the pain of separating from my mother. But I made it once before, so I know I can make it again" (24). Lorde's confession about her initial doubts in writing *Cancer Journals* is surprisingly candid. Her anxiety demonstrates how dangerous pain can be, that merely verbalizing the anguish of her mastectomy risks traumatizing her all over again.

While Lorde and Danquah emphasize the ways they suffer because of their impairment, disability students has consistently moved away from the negative aspects of disability like pain, and instead have focused on the ways that disability enriches lives. Part of the reason disability

studies has always pushed away from anguish is the social model of disability. As mentioned in the introduction, the social model separates impairment from the stigmatized term "disability," and argues that impairment isn't innately negative: that it is ultimately society and structural barriers that turn impairment into disabling experiences. By separating disability and impairment and suggesting that social barriers make impairment a disabling experience, a major legacy of the social model is disability pride. In the wake of the social model, rights groups championed disability as a valid identity marker and site of oppression like race and gender. The rationale behind these efforts is that structural inequity and the "fear of disability contributes to the social stigma of being disabled," thus "it is one of the goals of disabled politics to replace fear with the understanding that disability can be a valuable difference" (Wendell 171). Disability pride aims to demonstrate that disability is not a fearful anomaly, but an inevitability of the human experience. A direct result of this effort to rid disability of its cultural stigma, has been the field's privileging of "healthy disabilities," bodily impairment that isn't painful or a hindrance to well-being, while relegating tormented bodies to the margins.

Analyzing *Cancer Journals* and *Willow Weep* rightfully draws critical attention to the focus in disability studies on the positive aspects of impairment. Analysis of both texts demonstrates the productive uses and limitations of disability studies in understanding the experiences of black women with pained, chronically ill bodies. As critic, Anna Mollow reasons, "the framing [emphasis] of disability [studies] in terms of outward appearance is less useful for analyzing depression and other invisible impairments, particularly those that involve sickness and suffering" (416). For the unhealthy disabled and those with invisible impairments, the disabling aspects of their impairment aren't social constructs, as the social model dictates. These experiences encompass real pain, illness, and even death. Mollow understands Danquah's

emphasis on the illness of depression as an indirect call for the legitimacy, inclusion, and access to resources that institutionally and socially endorsed disabilities enjoy**.** To complicate Mollow's argument: if the popular reading of cure as ableist is irrelevant for those with painful disabilities that can be fatal if left untreated or not cured; and if the social model fails the experiences of sick subjects, then Danquah's and, by extension, Lorde's memoirs not only call for inclusivity. But these texts also beg a re-consideration of how disability is defined. As these understandings of black women's minds and bodies are redefined, so too must be old notions of the Strong Black Woman that leave little room to recognize vulnerability and disability**.**

Because the Strong Black Woman and the healthy disabled subject leave no ontological space for Lorde and Danquah, they each create their own embodied humanity rooted in disability and the vulnerability that they struggle to articulate throughout their memoirs. Because Danquah's newfound humanity is rooted around her depression, she liberates herself from the stranglehold of the Strong Black Woman by making depression external to herself. What I find comes to symbolize this gradual development of embodied humanity is a dream motif that Danquah seemingly organizes *Willow Weep* around. As Danquah narrates, she returns to this same dream at key points in her journey with depression, from starting therapy to taking regressive steps back in treatment. In these dreams Danquah finds a young girl drowning. Because Danquah is the only person who notices that the girl is drowning, she must decide whether she should risk her safety to save this girl. The dream always concludes on this cliffhanger before Danquah decides. In one of these dream sequences, Danquah recalls "No one was there except me and the girl. I didn't know what to do. My mind swelled with the temptation of evil. If I walked away, the responsibility of saving the girl would no longer be mine. Jump, the voice insisted" (93). Interestingly, Danquah never states the significance of the dreams or their

meaning, but the young girl in the dream seems to be an extension of Danquah. The child is incredibly vulnerable, literally hanging on the precipice of losing her life. Her fragility symbolizes the ever-present possibility of fatality that encompasses depression. Because these dreams have such incredibly high stakes, and Danquah is placed in the dramatic position of having to play the heroine and save someone's life, I consider these dreams an internal wrestling with the Strong Black Woman. The Strong Black Woman is similarly a heroic figure who has to frequently save those around her. In these dreams, Danquah seems to struggle with the approach that she wants to take in treating her depression. Just as she is left at the end of each dream wondering whether or not to save the young girl, in her waking life, she faces a similar quandary of whether or not she wants to continue to perform the exteriorized role of the Strong Black Woman and save herself from depression.

At the memoir's conclusion Danquah considers the importance of the dreams yet again, but quickly shifts from these dream sequences of suffering to "my other dreams, the aspirations in my soul, not in my head" (229). She then dedicates herself to these life goals and to life. Despite the dramatic change in the focus of her narrative, she recounts that "there was no master plan, no bolt of lightning from the sky, no cryptic calling. I was sick and tired of waiting for miracles, waiting for approval, waiting for happiness. For years I had been…asking over …and over, 'Why me?' and I never found the answer so I figured what the hell, and decided to try asking, 'Why not me?'" (230). This abrupt change from discussing puzzling dreams to proactively taking over her life and scrounging up the drive to dig herself out of this situation seems to echo the determination of the Strong Black Woman and the overcoming narrative. What makes the difference is that Danquah makes no claims in the conclusion of cure, no testimony of overcoming depression. Danquah notes that she still lives with depression: "I, and

others like me, seem to be doomed right from the get-go. While I recognize the importance of such information, I regard most of the data as blather and refuse to embrace it. Personally, I choose to believe that somewhere, somehow, there is a cure for depression. I have to. But I think the healing, the reversal, must take place in the spirit, as well as the body. Therapy is crucial" (257). Danquah draws somewhat of a linear narrative arc in her conclusion in noting the progress she has made in addressing bouts of depression. Furthermore, at points when Danquah gestures towards the very opposite of her current success—failure, such as giving up on managing her depression or even death-- rather than articulate this fatalism, she uses ambiguous, euphemistic language (i.e. surrendering to illness instead of healing). However, instead of concluding *Willow Weep* with an inspirational narrative of overcoming depression or reiterating the ever-present possibility of suffering as black mythic strength would dictate, Danquah takes the middle ground of the two extremes and promotes the anticipatory hope of healing. She points out that in comparison to her early bouts with depression, now with any episodes, "I do not suffer through them. I know that wherever I am standing, a healing force is right beside me and I surrender to that, not to the illness. I immediately go and get help… And, as with other illnesses, the earlier it is detected, the better one's chances are of not being debilitated by it" (256). Danquah's efforts to represent her depression as something external to herself liberates her by making depression distinctive from her, and therefore something that she can detect, monitor, and manage. Again, in this instance, Danquah's decision to distance herself from depression, and to no longer identify it as a bad mood, contradicts pride efforts to promote disability as an identity rather than a character flaw or personal tragedy. Despite this clash, Danquah can do what the pride movement has overlooked in emphasizing empowerment—engage in a nuanced discussion of the pain and fatal realities of disability.

Although Lorde cites many problems with conventional strength--including its denial of human vulnerability and its reinforcement of the status quo—she still attributes her cancer survival story to a gender-based notion of fortitude. She grounds this strength in death noting that because "I had already faced my own death, whether or not I acknowledged it, and I needed now to develop that strength which survival had given me…it is that very difference which I wish to affirm, because I have lived it, and survived it, and wish to share that strength with other women" (Lorde 62). Some might argue that Lorde's self-portrayal as beating death merely reiterates the Strong Black Woman. Certainly, Lorde's re-telling of her survival journey parallels the survivalism of this trope. However, by integrating the vulnerability of illness and death, Lorde presents a nuanced sense of fortitude that more accurately reflects the human experience. *Cancer Journals* seems to suggest that scholars and writers don't need to entirely abandon strength, nor do they have to uphold the Strong Black Woman as a standard to unquestioningly regurgitate or perform. Instead, critics and writers can invoke a sense of strength that reflects embodied experiences. Thus, strength can be personally defined rather than a generic performance rooted in hegemony.

Conclusion

Whereas doctor's offices and hospitals have existed for some as reliable outlets for treatment and compassion, Lorde's and Danquah's experiences with breast cancer and depression illustrate how the medical industry adversely treats black female patients, despite the advancements that have taken place because of the exploitation of black women. The dominant narrative of black women in the medical world has historically been silence, exploitive experimentation, and death. In fact, far from practicing scientific objectivity, for black women, the medical industry has often validated societal attitudes about black criminality and played a

central role in naturalizing the Strong Black Woman. Lorde and Danquah both allude to that history of trauma and overdetermination, and they transform it by voicing their journeys with illness and also their criticisms of medical authorities. Popular readings of *Cancer Journals* and *Willow Weep for Me* situate them as canonical and timely intersectional works that draw critical attention to the essentialism of the medical world and the greater need for the inclusion of black female patients' perspectives in the discourse. Scholars champion Lorde for identifying breast cancer as a feminist issue and calling out normalized practices in cancer treatment that only reinforce women's place as sex objects. Danquah is similarly praised within disability studies for exposing the racial disparities in the mental health industry that lead to the criminalization of black mental illness as opposed to the romanticizing white mental illness receives.

Of the three chapters in this dissertation, Lorde and Danquah illustrate the most ambiguous relationship to the Strong Black Woman. At points throughout *Cancer Journals*, Lorde is highly critical of the assumptions people make about black female strength. She notes how difficult healing and integrating the loss of her breast into her identity is when this physical fragility is so incompatible with her former self-perception as inviolable. She even argues that these beliefs about black women's ability to withstand any trauma allows them to remain unprotected, and for the violence leveled against them to continue without any checks. From Lorde's persuasive commentary, it's clear that the danger of the Strong Black Woman is the way this figure justifies the status quo. Even though the Strong Black Woman erases black women's suffering, at other points in this memoir, Lorde reiterates the survivalism and deterministic nature of this figure. Danquah, by contrast, takes a harsher stance against the Strong Black Woman, identifying this trope as an iteration of the Mammy and an obstacle to making progress with depression. For the most part, Danquah discards the Strong Black Woman and the pressure

to save herself, citing this burden to overcome mental illness as one of her greatest obstacles to living with the disease. As opposed to the survivalism of *Cancer Journals*, Danquah doesn't construct a triumphant ending in which she overcomes depression. Instead she depicts herself as having a greater sense of power and control over her mental illness by making it distinctive from her and touts the theme of hope, hope for cure as her ultimate pursuit not a performance of independent strength. Although Danquah explicitly positions the Strong Black Woman as an antagonist in *Willow Weep*, and her narrative contradicts the linear overcoming that is so common with this trope, she still shows apprehension about vulnerability. Danquah for instance, is so anxious about titling her work "Willow Weep for Me" for fear that just by gesturing towards the many connotations of pain, she will symbolically victimize black women as a whole.

Lorde and Danquah seem to have such an ambiguous relationship with the Strong Black Woman because they also have an equally ambiguous relationship with their disabilities. Both writers strive to perceive their impairment beyond ableist terms as something shameful or a personal tragedy. But Lorde and Danquah don't incorporate disability into their sense of self as an identity with equal political saliency as race and gender. Given the lack of knowledge about the disability rights movement and the huge divide that existed between the disabled and black Americans around the time *Cancer Journals* and *Willow Weep* were written, not seeing disability as a collective group with inalienable rights and shared experiences of inequality shouldn't be considered a fault of the authors. Nonetheless, I locate a correlation in these memoirs between not identifying with disability and taking a dubious stance against the Strong Black Woman. For instance, even though the Strong Black Woman erases Lorde, she comes to depend on this trope to cope with the erasure. In interviews, Lorde is critical of mainstream notions of black fortitude, but nonetheless she seems to suggest in *Cancer Journals* that writers don't have to dispose of the

Strong Black Woman nor do they have to faithfully perform every characteristic of this archetype. Instead, writers can arrive at an inner sense of strength tailored to their individual embodied experiences. Similarly, Danquah openly contends with the Strong Black Woman, yet seems to conclude her memoir with an understanding of vulnerability as a slippery slope for black women that all too easily leads to demoralizing, imperfect victimhood with little redemptive potential. After analysis of these two texts, it appears that a full rejection of the Strong Black Woman and the inviolability she stands for hinges on a full embrace of disability.

I identify racial authenticity or realness as a key component of the Strong Black Woman and the through-line that connects *Cancer Journals* and *Willow Weep*. A prominent theme in the larger body of Lorde's work, but particularly in Cancer Journals is her self-presentation as a misfit with no mainstream community to belong to. Little has been said about authenticity, but I believe assumptions about authentic blackness and authentic womanhood have everything to do with the exclusion she experiences. As a lesbian, Lorde is deemed inauthentically black amongst race groups, and as a black subject, she's deemed inauthentic and ostracized amongst white feminist circles. The similar rejection Danquah receives from family and friends when she reveals her bouts with depression, demonstrate a conviction in black authenticity thought to be completely incompatible with mental illness. Black authenticity or racialized realness is a sense of genuineness rooted in class struggle that black subjects allegedly inherited from enslaved ancestors. Realness dictates that because enslaved ancestors presumably suffered the worst of racism in America, black Americans in the contemporary period inherit a realness that gives them the strength to endure any kind of tribulation. This revisionist history completely overlooks the ways that institutional racism has made the experiences of enslaved ancestors and their descendants not all that different. But therein lies the point and the key similarity between

realness and the Strong Black Woman—they expect black subjects to will themselves to survive the most dire circumstances, while overlooking the stratification that creates this disparity. Black women who declare depression or worse, seek outside assistance through therapy, rather than quietly contend with their strife or turn their pain outwards into entertainment that serves others, like the long-suffering woman, are deemed inauthentically black.

With this chapter, I focused on how mythic black strength and the healthy disabled subject together make sick black women like Lorde and Danquah invisible to the outside world and more importantly make it additionally harder to live with illness. The healthy disabled subject and the Strong Black Woman would seem like an unlikely pair. As a white heteronormative male who enjoys most societal privileges, the healthy disabled subject would appear to be the polar opposite of the Strong Black Woman. Nonetheless, both erase sick black women like Lorde and Danquah. The healthy disabled subject and his visible, though non-fatal bodily impairments have become the unofficial representative of disability in mainstream media, completely overshadows those living with invisible disabilities, and chronic painful illness like Lorde and Danquah. And the Strong Black Woman's endless care for others and demands of physical exertion at all costs with little to no interiority or self-consideration makes Lorde's and Danquah's ruminations unreadable. While they appear distinctive, what connects the healthy disabled and the Strong Black Woman is their intolerance for sick black women. The fact that we don't see women like Lorde and Danquah in these popular representations only affirms the extent to which black women must appear physically able whether they're healthy or not.

Lorde and Danquah both anticipate fundamental principles of disability studies. Lorde unknowingly echoes disability studies scholars' criticism of the medical model, as she urges readers to refrain from the mainstream understanding of breast cancer as an individual medical

problem, brought upon by lifestyle choices. Lorde instead acknowledges how political breast cancer is, as factors like race and class greatly affect one's exposure and access to treatment. By emphasizing the importance of self-diagnosis, Danquah similarly implores readers to usurp some agency from medical practitioners, which parallels efforts within disability rights activism to centralize the disabled subject's perspective in the discourse. However, the issue that divides Lorde and Danquah from disability studies principles is the pain of their conditions. Disability studies makes no room for people living with very real and fatal illnesses. This contradiction thus begs a re-consideration of how the field defines disability beyond the limiting notion of disability as a social construct as the social model suggests.

I identify Lorde's and Danquah's struggles to establish a greater sense of interiority in spaces where they are urged to perform externalized mythic strength as one of the central conflicts in both texts. Voice is ultimately key to accessing this interiority, although the commentary Lorde and Danquah craft around their positionality, along with their strategies for tapping into this voice are different. This tension reflects a larger apprehension around fragility in black feminist theory. As I outline in the introduction, black feminists certainly don't deny vulnerability, but texts often refrain from extensive discourse about the subject. The dearth of conversation about embodied vulnerability only further demonstrates the significance and timeliness of *Cancer Journals* and *Willow Weep for Me*. What is essentially at the heart of Lorde's and Danquah's consideration of vulnerability is acceptance of disability, despite the focus in scholarly discourse on race and gender. For instance, as many scholars have noted, racial and gender identity are key to the process of healing for Lorde in *Cancer Journals*. However, what is seldom recognized is that the voice Lorde establishes is just as rooted in illness and death, as it is in her identity as a black lesbian. Lorde takes a stark, somewhat polarizing

stance that women's experiences with illness have little value if they don't transform these into pointed criticism.

Danquah connects key moments in her journey to intimate encounters with racism, virtually discovering the words to articulate long-standing feelings of depression within a racialized context. I've found that the connection Danquah makes between her depression and her experiences as a black American parallels Eng's racial melancholia, which asserts that regular racial devaluation destroys the spirit in a similar manner to grief. In applying racial melancholia to the trauma Danquah witnesses and experiences is to further complicate this theory and argue that encounters with racism not only tear down the spirit but they gradually wear down the mental health of those on the receiving end. As Danquah suggests throughout *Willow Weep*: mental illness isn't only bound up with race, but racism literally makes black subjects sick. Although tropes like the Strong Black Woman present blackness as stalwart, I hope that this chapter presents a timely counterargument, that black subjects and mental illness are inextricably tied together. Danquah essentially lifts up the veil on the mental impact of racism that a figure like the Strong Black Woman would mask.

Ultimately, I would argue that as *Willow Weep for Me* and *Cancer Journals* discuss disabled embodiment, along with its intersections with race and gender, these two texts are evidence of what I believe is a pattern in African American women's writing of crafting discourse that dovetails with disability studies, without explicitly referencing the field or its terminology**.** Whether we consider Harriet Wilson, whose chronic illnesses in *Our Nig* interfere with her ability to labor and eventually spark her interest in homeopathic treatment or Harriet Jacobs, who attests to spending seven years in a tightly confined space that contorted her body, the implications of black disabled embodiment is a lengthy tradition**.** Both Danquah and Lorde's

struggles with the fragility of illness additionally demonstrate that the myth of black female strength and invulnerability can be a double-edged sword for black female patients seeking treatment in the medical industry. On the one hand, the figure of the Strong Black Woman attempts to silence the narratives of sick, black subjects navigating the white spaces of the medical world. On the other hand, the fantasy that this trope presents of inspiring survivalism placates and soothes the very subjects it erases. By identifying the Strong Black Woman as a primary antagonist to black women's experiences Danquah and Lorde present a more human and complex sense of self that attempts to balance the pain that disability rights groups so often overlook, and the vulnerability of depression and breast cancer that the Strong Black Woman declares is non-existent.

Chapter Three

Is the Supercrip the New Strong Black Woman?: Black Female Heroism in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death*?

Harriet Tubman is celebrated as a national hero, having guided dozens of enslaved people on the Underground Railroad to freedom. Yet until recently, historical accounts have erased her disability. As the direct result of her enslaver hitting her over the head with a metal weight, Tubman suffered a lifelong brain injury (some speculate that it may have been epilepsy). While her injury would seem to be a disadvantage on a journey across the Underground Railroad, as it caused fainting spells, Tubman instead claimed that her epileptic seizures became a channel for her to directly communicate with God for direction. Thus, she understood a potential liability that made her vulnerable to slavecatchers as a unique asset. In many regards, Tubman is a blueprint of the Strong Black Woman, having survived the cruelty of slavery, and possessing the courage to not only escape, but selflessly lead others out of bondage. However, Tubman's disability also makes her an example of what disability studies scholars call a "supercrip": a popular representation of disabled subjects who, either in spite of or because of disability, accomplish astounding feats that the average able-bodied person couldn't perform. Impairments that enhance abilities, like the archetype of the blind prophet whose blindness supposedly gives greater abilities like wisdom and insight into the future, is a common example of the supercrip.

A major lesson to learn from the historic treatment of Tubman's disability is that when authors make the supercrip into another shorthand for the Strong Black Woman, they reinforce

the same stereotypes of hyper ability that invalidate the experiences of black disabled subjects. I note an overlap of the Strong Black Woman and the supercrip in recent biographical portrayals of Tubman that is a far cry from the historic omission of her condition, but equally problematic. The 2019 film *Harriet*, directed by Kasi Lemmons, illustrates the pitfalls of the supercrip by making Tubman's disability a central source of plot tension. Many stories like *Harriet* dredge up Tubman's brain injury for the sake of confirming the master narrative of her as a determined leader and the proverbial "Moses" of enslaved African Americans. Her disability becomes the means for her transformation into a fierce, gun-toting superhero, with an almost supernatural bond with God. But the film refrains from using disability to provide Tubman with a human sense of nuance or to highlight the paradox of disability and U.S. chattel slavery, in which black bodyminds play a crucial part in the production of labor, yet that same labor often disabled them as expendable and subject to physical and mental punishment. With Tubman, the supercrip and the Strong Black Woman not only go hand in hand, but the supercrip becomes another iteration of traditional black strength.

I open this chapter with Tubman, and the recent filmic adaptation of her life because the change in the discursive treatment of her brain injury demonstrates how easily a Strong Black Woman figure can be transformed into a supercrip. The Strong Black Woman, like the supercrip, is a marginalized figure. Instead of becoming a victim, her heightened ability to either overcome barriers of adversity like racism and sexism or survive everyday life and maintain a motivating sense of resolve all define her strength. While the accomplishments of a supercrip can vary, as some inspire through astounding feats, and others inspire by merely performing mundane tasks like self-grooming or cooking a meal, the expectations of black women are always exponentially high and often detrimental to their mental and physical health. This pressure, as Anna Hinton

notes, “leaves very little room for the presence of disability. Moreover, it places the onus for dealing with oppressive conditions on individuals, perpetuating the myth of individualism and the discourse of personal responsibility, rather than forcing societal change” (451). The limitations we expect of everyone else become intolerable with black women. Like all black bodyminds, the Strong Black Woman is expected to be a superbody when it comes to labor, mental resiliency, and many other aspects of life. Even if the socioeconomic circumstances a character may be mired in are well below the average, the Strong Black Woman, like the supercrip, diverts attention from any reasonable demands for structural change. This figure is supposed to be exceptional in comparison to the average person and unaffected by the inevitabilities of the human experience like disability. The ableist assumption that strength and impairment can’t co-exist within the same bodymind essentially undergirds these standards.

Like the Strong Black Woman, supercrips are supposed to be exceptional. In fact, this ability to do what most people, able-bodied or disabled, cannot is what makes them inspiring. Despite their uniqueness, popular culture is saturated with these representations to suggest that the supercrip is a norm amongst the disabled rather than the exception. The genre of classic comic books, for example, has countless instances of supercrip representations. While it’s unclear when and how the term supercrip came to be, as no single critic coined the term, it’s believed that the word is loosely based off of the comic icon Superman and his romanticized heroism. In many comic books, there are supercrip characters with some kind of physical difference that they either rise above in order to save the world, like Superman, or it enhances their abilities, giving them advantages over the average person. Marvel’s Daredevil, for instance, was blinded as a child through a chemical accident, but his blindness helps manifest his supra-human hearing abilities. Stephen Hawking, who was recently portrayed in the biographical film

The Theory of Everything (2014), is often presented as an inspiring supercrip because he lived with the neurological disease ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis), but nonetheless became a world-renowned physicist. The supercrip has been a cultural mainstay for countless generations, and as I suggest with the three examples I provide, he is most commonly represented as a white male in mainstream media. The term "supercrip" is relatively modern, as it started circulating amongst disability rights groups in the 1970s as a colloquial expression before it made its way into academia in the 1990s. Scholars like Sami Schalk suggest that the representation can be traced further back to the late nineteenth century with circus "freak acts" (73-74). Part of the enduring popularity of the supercrip is not only the wonder it impresses upon audiences, but that these are feel-good representations that make physical difference inspiring or make the viewers forget the character is disabled, when impairment in reality is often alienating and disheartening.

The supercrip has more often than not come under fire within disability studies as a major threat to rights efforts for legal protections and greater public inclusivity. Writers and critics like Joseph Shapiro and RJ Berger have been highly vocal about the limitations of the supercrip. Shapiro's book *No Pity: People with Disabilities Forging a New Civil Rights Movement* (1994) was published around the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990), and it contains one of the earlier definitions of the supercrip as an "inspirational disabled person […] glorified […] and] lavishly lauded in the press and on television" (16). This is the primary definition of the trope that scholars cite most frequently, which is somewhat ironic as the definition focuses more on the popularity of the figure rather than the problems with the supercrip. But beyond merely defining the supercrip, much of the criticism Shapiro levels against the figure is rooted in the belief that these stereotypes stymie any possibility of the able-bodied mainstream understanding the disabled as human beings. More importantly, Shapiro identifies these stereotypes as an

obstacle to greater social inclusivity and civil rights for the disabled. This linkage of the supercrip to civil rights essentially reflects Shapiro's investment in disability rights and historicizing the first wave disability rights movement.

Published ten years later, Ronald J. Berger's "Pushing Forward: Disability, Basketball, and Me" (2004) also makes an argument against the supercrip that scholars frequently reference or mirror in their own work. Berger contends that the problem with supercrip narratives is that they "foster unrealistic expectations about what people with disabilities can achieve, what they should be able to achieve if only they tried hard enough. Society does not need to change. It is the myth of the self-made man" (798). Berger's work is important to mention in discussing the discourse around the supercrip because I understand him as being one of the earlier scholars to ground the debate over the supercrip in the social model of disability. Berger suggests that if society truly disables people, as the social model suggests, then the supercrip is inherently problematic because it suggests that society isn't the problem, but instead the impairment is the problem that subjects must overcome or turn into an amazing ability. Berger's argument about the ableist blame the supercrip places on impairment is echoed in Carla Filomena Silva and P. David Howe's claim that the supercrip "perpetuates the understanding of [disabled] existence as a 'problem'" (175). We can also see how the medical model underlies Russell Meeuf's criticism of the supercrip "as simply a metaphor for individual achievement" and willpower (89). José Alaniz summarizes the vitriol against the supercrip in disability studies, arguing that this archetype is "a sort of overachieving, overdetermined self-enfreakment that distracts from the lived daily reality of most disabled people" (31). As a direct result of the popularity of these kinds of disabled characters and personalities, audiences don't see the ways that impairment for many can be painful and difficult to live with every day because of access barriers. The potential

problem with supercrip representations is that they transform serious issues of structural inequality into a matter of mere willpower or an optimistic outlook on the part of the disabled subject.

The supercrip is universally understood in disability studies as problematic. While this figure rightfully draws reproach within disability studies, I've found that much of the criticism is leveled against white male supercrip representations. Ultimately, when the supercrip is black, observations about the figure's erasure of inequality become irrelevant. In this chapter, I examine two late twentieth century texts to illustrate the potential of the supercrip. I also strive to carve out a lineage of black women who have been made to stand along the thin line between Strong Black Women and supercrips, from Tubman to the contemporary moment, in hopes of showing the enduring reality of this characterization. While I've explored in the previous two chapters the ways that the Strong Black Woman is a proverbial dead-end, a question that arises in this chapter is does the supercrip possess qualities that make fortitude redeemable? If authors allow the supercrip to stand alone or in other words, exist in a text without alluding to the Strong Black Woman as an originary reference point or affirming this figure through imitation, can the supercrip become an alternative to the Strong Black Woman? And furthermore, would this replacement be productive and useful to African American literary discourse? Can authors and critics use the supercrip to reconcile tensions with vulnerability in black feminist circles that the Strong Black Woman overlooks? Or is a replacement of this canonized trope with the supercrip more of the same problems of overdetermination and essentialism? Ultimately, in this chapter I contend that yes, we can think of the supercrip in these more redemptive ways, if we look beyond representations of the supercrip as a white man. If the basis of arguments against the supercrip is a valuation of the social model, which I've already explained in the previous chapter

has its limitations, then there needs to be a re-consideration of the supercrip, just as there should be a re-consideration of how disability is defined. I use this chapter to not only argue that scholars need to more readily acknowledge the white heteronormative origins of the supercrip, but to also pay nuanced attention to how the supercrip changes from bodymind to bodymind, rather than dismiss the supercrip as a whole. When an author places a black female supercrip in the text, and allows this archetype to stand on its own, there's a tremendous amount of discursive potential. However, if the supercrip exists in the text as a variant Strong Black Woman, they reinforce much of the same trouble with essentialism that we have seen throughout this project with the Strong Black Woman. I will use Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* (2010) as case examples[24] to illustrate my argument about the supercrip. *Who Fears* demonstrates how dangerous the supercrip can be for black women, if the figure merely reinforces every toxic aspect of the Strong Black Woman, and *Parable* shows the potential of the supercrip in presenting a pessimistic heroism that's grounded in disability.

In contrast to the common depiction of the supercrip as an almost mythic figure existing outside of any framework other than the miraculous, the sociohistorical contexts the protagonists in *Parable* and *Who Fears* operate within are incredibly rich. *Sower* is a speculative novel set in California during the 2020s. While the novel takes place in a specific region, readers are to

[24] I define *Parable of the Sower* and Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* (2010), the second novel I will examine in this chapter as speculative fiction. My understanding of speculative fiction dovetails with Jewelle Gomez's description of it as an overarching genre in which "writers speculate a world that makes manifest more than is culturally accepted… The manifestations…illuminate, finally, the ordinary emotional and intellectual questions we all ask of ourselves" (Gomez 948-949).

[24] Just as the acts of violence the Nuru commit against the Okeke is religiously motivated, the superficial difference in appearance between the two groups can be traced back to the central religious text in the village, the Great Book. According to the Great Book, the narrator remarks that "the Okeke people have skin the color of the night because they were created before the day. They were the first. Later, after much had happened, the Nuru arrived. They came from the stars and that's why their skin is the color of the sun" (Okorafor 16).

understand California as a microcosm of the bedlam occurring across the globe. An ongoing climate crisis, and the recent election of a pseudo-fascist dictator, Christopher Donner, all bring about the swift destruction of California's economic infrastructure that leaves the novel's protagonist, fifteen-year-old Lauren, orphaned. The novel follows her as she travels up to Northern California to build her own community rooted in her belief system, "Earthseed." Meanwhile, the corporation Kagimoto, Stamm, Frampton, and Company (KSF) aims to address California's water crisis by setting up privatized desalination plants in neighborhoods, and having residents work in exchange for some financial stability and basic living necessities, like housing and food. In parallel to *Sower, Who Fears Death* is a dystopic text that portrays a society that has completely come apart at the seams. Set in the Seven Rivers Kingdom, a fictional region in Sudan, Okorafor presents an African nation torn asunder as a result of systemic rape and genocide that the ruling class, the Nuru, characterized by their light complexion, wage against the Okeke, characterized by a deeper complexion.[25] Like *Sower, Who Fears Death* is a text about the trials and tribulations of a years-long journey that the protagonist, sixteen-year-old Onyesonwu, sets out on in order to find and kill her father, the sorcerer who raped her mother essentially producing her. Along the way, she heads an all-out rebellion against the powers behind the genocide.

Lauren and Onyesonwu are both supercrips, but in entirely different ways. Lauren has hyperempathy, an "'organic delusional syndrome'" that she developed at birth as a result of her mother's use of the intellectual stimulant, which Lauren describes as "Paracetco, the small pill,

[25] The superficial difference in appearance between the Nuru and the Okeke can be traced back to the central religious text in the village, the Great Book. According to the Great Book, "the Okeke people have skin the color of the night because they were created before the day. They were the first. Later, after much had happened, the Nuru arrived. They came from the stars and that's why their skin is the color of the sun" (Okorafor 16).

the Einstein powder, the particular drug my mother chose to abuse before my birth killed her, I'm crazy, I get a lot of grief that doesn't belong to me, and that isn't real. But it hurts" (Butler 12). Hyperempathy is a psychological disorder that makes Lauren "feel what I see others feeling or what I believe they feel" (12). Thus, if someone around her is in any kind of bodily pain or experiencing some kind of physical pleasure, hyperempathy makes Lauren hallucinate and feel the same sensations. On the one hand, hyperempathy is an unstable, questionable delusion that manifests in the mind. On the other hand, the tangible feelings and sensations of the physical body are very real for sharers and affirm their delusions. I consider hyperempathy a disability because, quite simply put, Lauren considers it as such. Early in her journey up north, she makes strenuous efforts to mask her hyperempathy because as she puts it, "sharing is a weakness, a shameful secret. A person who knows what I am can hurt me, betray me, disable me with little effort" (178). Like many other disabilities, hyperempathy stigmatizes her bodymind as different. Furthermore, sharing is characterized by vulnerability as it's painful, but also completely debilitating.

In contrast to my interpretation, many readings of *Sower* fail to understand hyperempathy as a disability. I incorporate a passage from Esther Jones' *Medicine and Ethics in Black Women's Speculative Fiction* (2015), which for all intents and purposes is a stellar project, but it also demonstrates the stakes of not properly reading disability in a text. Rather than analyze Lauren's hyperempathy as a unique disability that is consequential to her characterization and her perspective, Jones collapses disability and presents the world of *Sower* as a space where everyone is either literally or metaphorically bodily variant to some extent. Jones contends that "Butler…depict[s] America as so radically disordered that pain, disease and poverty are the overwhelming reality of most of the nation's citizens. In doing so, Butler extrapolates the social

ills and their effects on not only the physically impaired but on everyone else also" (114). Jones claims that because *Sower* is a post-apocalyptic text, the entire world is ill, metaphorically and literally. Jones essentially understands disability as a symbol in the text that represents the moral, social, and structural decay of the times. While violence, starvation, and death are all rampant in the post-apocalyptic California of *Sower*, to single out disability as a sign of social upheaval normalizes the idea that impairment is inherently negative. More importantly, this reading of the predominance of disability in the novel is simply a misreading. If most people are sick and disabled, and Lauren is therefore one in a vast majority of disabled people, her hyperempathy would be inconsequential. However, as I mentioned, hyperempathy is a condition that distinguishes Lauren from others, it carries with it the stigma of both race and disability, and it makes her vulnerable. By collapsing disability, readers miss out on the complex juxtaposition of hyperempathy as both an asset and a basis of Earthseed, and a means of vulnerability that makes Lauren's journey all the more dangerous and difficult. Like Jones' reading, critics often understand Lauren's hyperempathy as a character quirk.[26] In various readings, hyperempathy is exoticized as a superpower that readers are supposed to perceive in a state of awe, or critics read the condition through the lens of race and solely focus on the way hyperempathy alludes to the historical scapegoating of black mothers and drug abuse. While hyperempathy certainly makes a commentary about racial deviance that I will speak on, looking explicitly at race is inadequate. As a disability, hyperempathy shapes Lauren's identity, it shapes how she views the world, and it informs Earthseed, the core project of her character arc. When reading a bodily variant character like Lauren, a thorough analysis must take into account disability.

[26] For further discussion on the mischaracterization of Lauren's hyperempathy, see Leong 19-21 and Thomson 42.

I view Lauren as a supercrip because in spite of her hyperempathy, she fends off scavengers in duels, scrounges up food, and secures shelter throughout her trek up north. These actions at a surface level illustrate the resourcefulness and adventure of an action heroine. Furthermore, Lauren does what many in the novel who become casualties to the apocalyptic times cannot do: she thrives and builds her own community, Acorn, around Earthseed. While Lauren's hyperempathy is a more conventional example of disability, Onyesonwu's excess abilities make her both physically variant and exceptional as a supercrip. With Onyesonwu, Okorafor takes the sense of adventure we see with Lauren and heightens it to the point of spectacle. Just like many comic book superheroes, Onyesonwu possesses a seemingly endless number of supernatural abilities, from shape-shifting to prophesy. Onyesonwu is not necessarily disabled in the conventional sense like Lauren. But her supernatural powers and her ethnically mixed heritage as an Ewu all signal her physical difference,[27] and her community accordingly ostracizes her because of these variances. In other words, Onyesonwu is read as so bodily variant within her village, she is consequently perceived and treated as disabled. The perception of Onyesonwu as disabled dovetails with the common approach in disability studies of reading impairment as dynamic and context based. What's considered a disability and a disadvantage in one context can quickly become a privilege and a normative feature in another context. Thus, while Onyesonwu wouldn't be read in conventional terms as disabled like Lauren, in the speculative context of *Who Fears Death*, her bodymind is read as such. Furthermore, Onyesonwu locates a metaphoric sense of community with others in the margins and identifies normativity as the common denominator that persecutes all of them. Onyesonwu refers to

[27] Ewu are the multi-ethnic offspring produced from the Nuru men's sexual assault of Okeke women.

normativity as a perpetual state of bondage and concludes that "to be something abnormal meant that you were to serve the normal. And if you refused, they hated you…and often the normal hated you even when you did serve them" (Okorafor 218). Onyesonwu suggests the primacy of normativity by collapsing the hierarchy of bodily difference, and suggesting that all kinds of bodily variety, whether it's ethnicity or impairment, are connected under this state of bondage to the normative.

Rather than examine Lauren and Onyesonwu pejoratively as the customary approach in disability studies would dictate, I propose that both characters provide insight into what black female leadership amidst apocalypse looks like outside of the romantic ideal of the Strong Black Woman. I briefly gesture towards Schalk's "Reevaluating the Supercrip" because she articulates my conviction in the discursive usefulness of the supercrip. Schalk similarly urges disability studies critics to refrain from the blanketed dismissal of the supercrip, and actually consider the possible value of this representation. Rather than "us[e] supercrip as a label," Schalk asserts that "it is more appropriate to understand the supercrip as a narrative form which is actively constructed around a disabled person or character through specific mechanisms" (78). Schalk reasons that analysis shouldn't end at labeling a subject a supercrip, identifying the textbook qualities of the trope, and consequently rejecting the narrative as problematic. This approach treats the supercrip as a lived ontological identity, when scholars instead should focus on how this figure is constructed. In Schalk's eyes, the key questions shouldn't ask to what extent does this representation line up with the stereotypes of the supercrip, but instead, what are the plot devices, narrative gestures, and rhetorical tools that shape a disabled subject into this overachiever? To further extend Schalk's point, I think we shouldn't just think about how a text is constructed from a formalist perspective, but also the voices that are left out in the

construction of a text's dominant narrative. If scholars prioritize the literary construction of supercrip representations, we can not only examine the form of the text, but the underlying values and assumptions about race, gender, and class. Critics can more readily see how certain bodyminds are readily labeled as a supercrip, and others, notably black women, are overlooked.

Although Lauren and Onyesonwu are supercrips, they don't perpetuate the problems that disability studies scholars outline with the trope. They aren't inspiring supercrips whose struggles and triumphs exist in a vacuum of willpower as is the case with white supercrips. In fact, what makes Lauren and Onyesonwu physically aberrant is deeply wedded to highly politicized issues like fascism and ethnic genocide. For instance, the way that Lauren develops hyperempathy in-utero from a drug-addicted mother that readers never see alludes to the faceless masses of single black "crack" mothers that the mass media scapegoated for all of the nation's problems during the crack era of the 1980s. And in regard to Onyesonwu's supernatural abilities, she doesn't randomly acquire these skills, nor do they result from divine intervention. Instead, the narrator makes it clear that Onyesonwu acquires these abilities indirectly through the weaponized rape of her mother amidst ethnic genocide. Ultimately, in both *Sower* and *Who Fears Death*, the protagonists possess disabilities that enable miracles to happen. However, Butler and Okorafor make the point to fully contextualize their bodily differences and signify with historic as well as contemporary realities of the African and African American experiences.

Because Butler and Okorafor masterfully tie disability to the supernatural, as well as to real issues like misogynoir and ethnic cleansing, I would venture to say that some of the problems critics outline with the supercrip trace back to the character's common portrayal as a white heteronormative man. Because popular culture frequently favors white male supercrips, it isn't surprising that issues of social stratification are erased, when the subject possesses racial

and gender privileges in contrast to supercrip narratives centered on disabled black women. Critics can't expect someone who enjoys most societal privileges outside of ability to be able to tell a story that speaks to structural oppression he doesn't even experience. Thusly, I find that it isn't the trope of the supercrip that's the problem. The repeated problem with discourse on the supercrip is that white disabled men are the default reference point. Therefore, what's needed in this conversation is a greater range of supercrip characters that more accurately reflects the diversity of the actual disabled community.

Although Lauren and Onyesonwu are both supercrips, a key distinction that I argue throughout the chapter is that Onyesonwu is a supercrip that imitates and reiterates the Strong Black Woman, while Lauren explicitly rejects this archetype. Essentially, what's at the root of the differing stances each novel takes on the Strong Black Woman is maternalism. Because *Parable* associates motherhood with death and exploitation, Lauren distances herself from any instances of maternalism. She is not invested in any romantic notion of a familial legacy and perpetuating her own lineage by having children of her own. Nor is Lauren invested in any metaphoric notions of society as a larger, extended family worthy of demonstrating compassion towards by saving as many people as possible from social upheaval. Ultimately, the Strong Black Woman, a quintessentially maternal figure whose primary value is her ability to provide care for others, is collateral damage in Lauren's repudiation of maternalism. Onyesonwu, by contrast, is just as much an iteration of the Strong Black Woman as she is a supercrip. She embarks on a lengthy journey of vengeance. However, this mission for personal redemption quickly becomes a mission to save all women in her community from the normalized sexism that has left them silenced and battered. Unlike Lauren, Onyesonwu not only becomes a literal mother to her

unborn child, but the narrator describes her as a matriarch of all women, liberating Nuru and Okeke women alike, and bestowing the gifts that make her a supercrip onto them.

Ultimately, I attribute the parallels between Onyesonwu and the Strong Black Woman to Okorafor's vision of *Who Fears Death* as an opportunity to diversify representations of superheroes. Okorafor points out in an interview that while writing *Who Fears*, she wanted "to see more examples of what make someone a superhero. I think that people feel encouraged just by the idea that they could be that superhero, and that itself is empowering" ("The Running Girl of Wor(l)ds"). In an effort to challenge the normalized portrayal of superheroes as heteronormative white men, Okorafor relies on familiar, I would even argue stereotypical, characteristics that we see in the Strong Black Woman. In other words, in the process of troubling what a superhero looks like and making the idea of black women as superheroes plausible to readers, Okorafor plays into readers' expectations for a black female protagonist who is powerful, fearless, and selfless. The irony of Okorafor's authorial performance is that the expectations for a Strong Black Woman to protect and to nurture already resemble the characteristics of a superhero. Yet Okorafor's commentary reveals that audiences don't readily read black women as such. Thus, in order to be readable as a superhero, these familiar raced and gendered tropes must be present when the protagonist is a black woman. We can clearly see the difficult web of overdetermination that black speculative fiction authors must navigate in creating characters. While Okorafor strives to present a black female character who is believable to readers as a heroine, Butler seems fixated on presenting an entirely unrecognizable world, and radically different black female characters.

What I assert comes out of these differing writing projects are two variations of the black female supercrip. Onyesonwu illustrates all the positive and toxic qualities of destructive

selflessness explicit with the Strong Black Woman to such an extent, she proves that the Strong Black Woman and the supercrip can be interchangeable. In contrast, Lauren is the epitome of using a disability lens to free authors and scholars from their reliance on invulnerability as the optimum mode of being for black characters. Lauren proves that what's valuable about the supercrip is that it contains some of the best parts of the Strong Black Woman, like her inventiveness and tenacity, while openly admitting her fragility. Lauren shows readers that the supercrip can be the ironic basis of a balanced, human character that reconciles the Strong Black Woman's storied denial of disability. I hope to prove that of the three chapters in this dissertation, the supercrip is the most like the Strong Black Woman as this trope entails overcoming adversity in order to inspire. However, the key distinction between the two figures is that the supercrip has a built-in vulnerability through disability that the Strong Black Woman denies.

Before I gesture towards the chapter breakdown, it's important to note that in examining these two novels, I am not suggesting that African American literature and African diasporic texts can be conflated. Even though Okorafor is Nigerian American, *Who Fears Death*, like most of her other works, is firmly situated in an African context in which colonization never existed. By contrast, much of the conflict in *Parable of the Sower* is informed by the many extensions of American colonization and capitalism, from the re-surfacing of chattel slavery to the allusions to the racialized war on drugs in the 1980s. By juxtaposing these novels, I don't suggest that *Who Fears Death* should be interpreted from an American cultural lens, nor should *Parable of the Sower* be situated in an African framework. However, in this chapter I read these texts in tandem because if we were to place the supercrip on a spectrum, Lauren and Onyesonwu would represent opposing sides of this spectrum. *Who Fears Death* presents a feminist, matriarchal

supercrip who sacrifices herself. Meanwhile Lauren rejects this otherworldly, disabled variation of the Strong Black Woman, and even comes to resent it as a gross misreading of black women. In placing these novels side-by-side, I am not suggesting that one text provides a better response to the social upheaval over the other. Rather, *Parable of the Sower* and *Who Fears Death* together present an opportunity for a much-needed discussion about the limitations of black female sacrifice as a characteristic ideal of black female heroism.

In part II, I explore the ramifications of Onyesonwu as a supercrip. I argue that Okorafor draws a deterministic plot that constructs Onyesonwu as a feminist supercrip. Having been conceived out of rape, born into a violently sexist society, and the daughter of the patriarchal leader who's waging sexual warfare, the gender binary shapes Onyesonwu's entire character arc, from conflict to resolutions. I additionally discuss the presumably toxic features of the Strong Black Woman, notably the demonization of this figure as misandrist, and how these same characteristics become acceptable and even heroic in a feminist novel that centers on a sexist society. While Onyesonwu's character arc adheres to a rigid understanding of gender as binary, her mixed ethnic heritage disrupts ethnic and cultural boundaries. Although critics compare Onyesonwu's mixed ethnic background to the plot of the tragic mulatta, which I find to be anachronistic, I contend that Onyesonwu's identity notably challenges the authority of the matriarchal figure, Ani. Despite the fact that Ani is the central goddess figure of the Seven Rivers Kingdom, she naturalizes rudimentary binaries, and those who worship her use her as an excuse to validate violence exacted against those who are different. When I analyze Onyesonwu's death, I will demonstrate that even though Onyesonwu criticizes Ani as a limiting idea for the reasons I just stated, in her self-sacrifice, she presents a maternal strength that parallels that of Ani. I conclude the section with an exploration of all the ramifications of

Onyesonwu's death, both how her murder illustrates the worst of the Strong Black Woman and the supercrip, and how this resolution of the novel further normalizes excess black death instead of pushing against it.

I frame part III around Candice Jenkins' concept of the salvific wish and Ato Quayson's theory, aesthetic nervousness. Jenkins defines the salvific wish as a naturalized obligation placed on black women to use respectability politics to protect the black community from racism. I frame part III around the salvific wish because this inclination to protect others that Jenkins highlights is the heroic characteristic of the Strong Black Woman that Lauren openly rejects. I suggest that because Lauren refuses the self-destructive task of saving the world from the apocalypse, she may not be as noble as Onyesonwu, but she troubles assumptions about black womanhood that conventional supercrips like Onyesonwu fall victim to. Furthermore, Lauren illustrates that when the supercrip doesn't regurgitate the Strong Black Woman's performance as a self-sacrificing caregiver, this figure complicates black female characterization in provocative ways. In order to express the importance of disability to Lauren's characterization, I integrate Quayson's aesthetic nervousness theory. Quayson writes that disability upsets conventional characterization, plot devices and outcomes when the protagonist has an impairment, rather than a secondary or tertiary character. I depart from Quayson's theory and maintain that hyperempathy, specifically the compulsory conscience that Lauren touts as a side effect, allows Lauren to deviate from the inviolate heroine and complicate what would otherwise be another iteration of the bad black woman, showing that when disability is centralized and the black supercrip is stripped of impulses towards self-sacrifice, this becomes a very human representation of black womanhood.

II.

In this section, I examine plot structure, symbolism, and allusions in *Who Fears Death*, to see how the novel constructs Onyesonwu as a feminist supercrip, with the dominance of the Strong Black Woman. Because *Who Fears Death* is a fantasy novel, this genre opens up endless narrative possibilities that realism cannot. Thus, in comparison to Lauren, Onyesownu possesses logic-defying capabilities. By the novel's end, a sorceress performs a voodoo ritual on Onyesonwu in which she dies and is reborn into a better, even more powerful version of herself, wielding God-like sense of control over her bodymind as she can move cells to become pregnant and self-regenerate from fatal wounds. Being able to possess the power to do so much with the bodymind, and to operate fearlessly, demonstrates how the supercrip manifests the qualities of the Strong Black Woman into the realm of the magical and the supernatural.

As powerful as Onyesonwu is, interestingly her magic revolves around gender binaries. Regardless of what she does to her bodymind or what animal she morphs herself into, she can only become the female version of that being. And frequently throughout her journey, she explicitly uses her magic to right violent acts of sexism. One such instance of Onyesonwu's personal crusade against patriarchy occurs during one of the novel's final, climactic fight scenes. Onyesonwu parallels fierce agility and power of a comic strip superhero as she intervenes in a battle between the Nuru and the Okeke and recounts "weaving between the physical world and the wilderness as if they were land and water. I knocked men off women, their penises still erect and slick with blood and wetness. I fought men with knives and guns…I took bullets into myself, expelled them, and moved on" (Okorafor 345). The way Onyesonwu fights men head-on with stellar battle skills, can be understood as echoing the mannish qualities of the Strong Black Woman that often come under criticism. Where the Strong Black Woman is reprehended for breaking gender rules and emasculating black men by challenging their authority, the narrator presents Onyesonwu to readers

as an admirable heroine, who literally usurps masculinity in the form of phallic symbols like guns and knives from men who dare to use their proverbial and literal manhood to abuse women. The fact that Onyesonwu fights men brandishing phallic weapons speaks to how in this battle, she isn't only taking on her father and his genocidal movement, but she's contending with the larger patriarchal structure. For all intents and purposes, Onyesonwu resembles the ability and magical spectacle of the superhero, but she focuses her efforts on women's issues, making her a feminist supercrip. While Onyesonwu's implicit mission is noteworthy, her major character flaw that I will return to throughout this section is her lack of humanity in possessing no vulnerability.

Although Onyesonwu possesses the bravery and physicality of the supercrip, she doesn't have a noble origin as many heroes do. The Nuru seek to kill off the Okeke by systematically raping and impregnating the women. Najeeba, Onyesonwu's mother, ultimately conceives her through this rape. The theme of weaponized rape interestingly crosses issues of ethnic prejudice with gender rights issues, and it demonstrates how sexualized violence is used to maintain ethnic inequality or how one system of oppression re-affirms another. Jones offers an observation that adds to this point about the crossings between sexism and ethnic discrimination in *Who Fears Death*, noting that although there are "ethnic divisions…articulated along biological lines" between the Okeke and the Nuru, "each group holds the same perspective on women's roles in society, reflecting the duality of womanhood. Women are seen as powerful in their roles as culture bearers but burdened with maintaining ethnobiological purity" (66). The belief that the contrasts in the physical appearances of the Nuru and the Okeke amount to deeply ingrained differences at a biological level is woven into every aspect of society within the Seven Rivers Kingdom. Even though the binary between the two tribes is an enduring master narrative of their society, there are moments throughout *Who Fears Death* where this binary is betrayed. Jones highlights the

subjugation of women as a societal characteristic that connects the Nuru and the Okeke and contradicts this divide. On the one hand, according to Jones, the Okeke and the Nuru women wield the sole responsibility of perpetuating their race through childbirth and child-rearing. On the other hand, particularly with the Okeke women, their role as cultural gatekeepers is also the very power that makes them vulnerable. Being subjected to sexual assault from Nuru men yields multi-ethnic children that spell out the slow, but gradual death of Okeke heritage. The systematic rape of the Okeke women doesn't just comment on the pressures placed on women to maintain ethnic purity, and the way that womanhood is used to affirm narratives about racial and ethnic differences as Jones claims. The slippage between biologically determined cultural purity and sexual assault shows how quickly and easily what's at once a strength and a source of honor for Okeke women always exist at the same time as an opportunity for victimization. Strength and victimhood are interestingly tied up in the bodyminds of Okeke women.

The story of Onyesonwu's conception dovetails with the novel's larger message of female empowerment, in the sense that the woman who contends with the patriarchal powers in Sudan is also ironically someone born out of gendered violence. Najeeba's re-telling of her rape is one of the more graphic scenes in *Who Fears Death*. A major reason why this moment is so disturbing is the stark contrast Okorafor draws between voice and silence. Najeeba recalls that when the Nuru invaded her village, she:

> Screamed so loudly that all the air left her lungs and she felt something give from deep in her throat. She'd later realize that this was her voice leaving her forever…All of the Okeke women, young, prime, and old, were raped. Repeatedly. Those men didn't tire; it was as if they were bewitched. When they spent themselves inside one woman, they had more to give to the next… The Nuru women who'd come along laughed, pointed, and

> sang, too...The blood of the Okeke runs like water/We take their goods and shame their forefathers/We beat them with a heavy hand/They take what they call their land/The power of Ani belongs to us/And so we will slay you to dust/Ugly filthy slaves, Ani has finally killed you!...As he held her down, he brought a coin-shaped device from his pocket…It was the sort of device people used to keep the time, the weather, to carry a file of the Great Book…Its tiny black camera eye rose up, making a clicking and whirring sound as it began to record. (Okorafor 18-19)

Daib's rape of Najeeba feeds into the legend that Okorafor builds around Onyesonwu as a feminist supercrip. There's a determinism to the plot of *Who Fears Death*, in the sense that Onyesonwu is literally born into sexual violence. Gendered warfare is a defining aspect of her identity and it is the only reality that she knows. Therefore, by a sense of fate, constructed by Okorafor, bravely taking on sexism is Onyesonwu's entire character arc. She has no choice in the text but to be a feminist supercrip. In connection to theorization like that of Elaine Scarry who contends that language is at the heart of the power struggle between the torturer and the tortured,[28] Najeeba is silenced, just as the Nuru women metaphorically double up their language and their consequential power by using song to weave a narrative about the Okeke that validates their subjugation. The juxtaposition of Najeeba's brutal assault, and the dulcet singing of the Nuru women is painfully ironic. However crude the song is, it nonetheless symbolizes the Nuru's ability to oppress the Okeke by creating both a mythology about the differences between the two groups, and a culture that backs up these false binaries. Just as the project of conquest within colonization coincided with a discourse on racial differences, the Nuru similarly racialize the

[28] For further discussion on pain and language, see Scarry 4.

Okeke as natural-born slaves. The fact that the rape leaves Najeeba a quiet shell of her former self and begins Onyesonwu's trajectory as a feminist heroine is an important detail to note. Najeeba's silence makes her a foil character that makes Onyesonwu's vocal and physical resistance to injustice all the more pronounced. The violence of Najeeba's rape explains Onyesonwu's stigmatized identity as an "Ewu." Just as phenotypes are used to distinguish the Nuru and the Okeke, the Ewu are described as tall and lean, looking "neither Okeke nor Nuru, more like desert spirits," and possessing distinctive "trademark freckles" (25). Her skin color and freckles all function as markers of her identity and tangible reminders to the Okeke of the Nuru's long-standing, cruel subjugation of them.

In many ways, Onyesonwu's plight as an Ewu is similar to the popular portrayal of black and white biracial subjects as racial misfits. Like the tragic mulatta, Onyesonwu experiences alienation on both sides of her identity, and effectively has no community to belong to. The Nuru shun her for being part Okeke, and therefore inheriting all of their assumed inferiorities. And the Okeke similarly despise her for reminding them of their subjugation. Scholars like Joshua Yu Burnett argue that not only can readers liken Onyesonwu's plight to that of the mixed-race subject, but that readers can interpret her through the lens of slave narratives. Burnett states that within the context of a slave narrative, Onyesonwu can be read "as the mixed-race child of an initially unknown slave master father" like Frederick Douglass in his *Narrative*" or that "the use of female sexuality and fertility as forms of resistance" can be likened to "*Harriet Jacobs's Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl"* (149). I do agree that the tragic mulatto/a trope can be integrated into analysis of *Who Fears Death*; however, I don't believe that Onyesonwu's experiences as a multi-ethnic character, which are firmly rooted in African culture, should be

conflated with the African American slave narrative.[29] Ultimately, the tragic mulatto can be applied to *Who Fears Death* for the sake of helping critics think through variant bodyminds that challenge the validity of socially-constructed boundaries, rather than suggesting a homogeneity of the black experience.

Where the tragic mulatta often commits suicide, finding no racial home, Onyesonwu undergoes a drastic transformation in consciousness. Critic Miriam Pahl suggests that Onyesonwu's identity formation is non-linear and that "the novel *Who Fears Death* radically disrupts the culturally accepted assumption that identity is established progressively, integrating solely past events that one relates to" (211). However, if we are to read Onyesonwu as an iteration of the supercrip and the Strong Black Woman, two conventionally heroic figures, her establishment of identity is at times just as predictable and linear as the trajectory of the hero. She essentially begins the novel so desperate to be normative that she marks her own bodymind and participates in various rites of passage for young Okeke women, including female genital mutilation or the "Eleventh Rite." Onyesonwu's relationship with her bodymind eventually shifts from actively seeking out acceptance, to showing a sophisticated awareness of the way her village has victimized her for her differences. She comes to the conclusion that there isn't anything inherently wrong with her bodymind, and that "traditions [within the Seven Rivers Kingdom] limit and outcast those of us who aren't normal" (Okorafor 216). Onyesonwu reaches a heightened sense of consciousness, citing a stagnant society as the central problem, not people

[29] What's at the heart of U.S. slavery and the dilemma of the mixed-race child in American slave narratives is the binary between blackness and whiteness. Meanwhile, whiteness itself is absent within *Who Fears Death*, and Okorafor only depicts inter-ethnic strife between communities of color. To suggest that the story of a multi-ethnic character in an African region that has never known European colonization is on par with the stories of U.S. chattel slavery, suggests that the two can be collapsed, when they should be read within their specific racial context.

who are different like herself. Ultimately, an ignorant allegiance to custom is the major reason why the non-normative are ostracized. Furthermore, she identifies community in the margins, likening her Ewu ethnicity to impairment, or being "treated like someone with a highly contagious disease" (116). The association of Ewu with contagion suggests that they are inherently dangerous and unable to be contained. Ewu can freely roam and infect or affect those around them like a contagion, and therein lies their threat to the Nuru and the Okeke. The way that Onyesonwu's bodymind is perceived as not only variant but akin to contagion further validates my reading of Onyesonwu as disabled. The linkage of the Ewu to disease implies that normativity is at the basis of Onyesonwu's ethnically based stigmatization. While this latent criticism of normativity is radical, because Onyesonwu never seems to possess vulnerability, her eventual acceptance of her variant bodymind appears hollow in contrast to Lauren's hyperempathy.

Because Daib's rape of Najeeba fatalistically determines Onyesonwu's feminist supercrip arc, in a formulaic sense, Daib himself, a symbol of patriarchy, becomes Onyesonwu's primary antagonist. Daib and Onyesonwu's parent-child dynamic is stripped of all sentimentalism, and he consistently acts as the predator, openly preying upon his own offspring. Just as Onyesonwu is regularly subjected to the malicious stares of the people in her village, she is also repeatedly subjected to the menacing stare of her father, Daib, once she is initiated into sorcery training. The powers that Daib possesses to watch and unsettle Onyesonwu suggests that although she is a supercrip with supernatural abilities, there are still limits to her ability. If we read this complication in the feminist context of the novel, this power that Daib wages over Onyesonwu seems to be her own proverbial glass ceiling of sorts. Daib is the singular obstacle in *Who Fears* that Onyesonwu must overcome to reach her highest potential. We see the peril of Daib and his

gaze when he inhabits Onyesonwu's mind and shows her the moment in the past in which he began rallying together the genocidal movement against the Okeke. Onyesonwu mentions how she "felt sick… I brought my eyes to his eyes, first taking in his tall broad-shouldered stature, the black beard that hung down his chest. I didn't want to look. But I did. He saw me. His eyes grew wide. They flashed red for a second. He strode toward me" (178-179). The way that Onyesonwu's sentences break down into increasingly shorter and choppier phrases illustrates the increasing tension of this moment, as she almost comes face to face with Daib. Onyesonwu is reluctant to project her gaze back onto Daib. But when she does, rather than terrorize Daib, their power dynamic is uneven, as her look only incites aggression from Daib that is swiftly interrupted by her lover, Mwita. While Daib and Onyesonwu have a complicated familial tie, they draw a simplistic binary, reminiscent of the battles of good vs. bad in superhero narratives. Daib is purely bad, with no redeemable qualities. And like the Strong Black Woman, Onyesonwu lacks dimension as a purely noble, exemplary character.

One of the few distinctions between Onyesonwu and the Strong Black Woman is her rejection of established religion. Religion is a primary resource of spiritual replenishment for the Strong Black Woman, and it's often the source of her authority. A Strong Black Woman can wield power over others by demonstrating her religious acumen. But in *Who Fears Death*, the dominant religious text in Jwahir, the Great Book, is a source of subjugation for Onyesonwu that attempts to negate her self-worth. In parallel to the Holy Bible, the societal structure of Jwahir is based around the Great Book. This text incorporates both folklore and monotheism, and perpetuates rudimentary binaries like "light and dark? Beauty and ugliness" (318), and most importantly the Okeke as natural-born slaves, and the Nuru as natural slave-masters. Although the Great Book naturalizes these rudimentary dichotomies, it interestingly contains no definitive

explanation of this tension. The narrator speculates that "these names must have been agreed upon during peaceful times, for it was well known that the Okeke were born to be slaves of the Nuru. Long ago, during the Old Africa Era, they had done something terrible causing Ani to put this duty on their backs. It is written in the Great Book" (16). What's particularly striking about the effort here to trace back the village's strife to the Great Book is how frustratingly vague the language is. There's no explanation as to why the Okeke are slaves to the Nuru, other than the vacuous belief that they "had done something terrible." Even when it comes to their tribal names, the very basis on which they build their identity and their presumed differences, there's no chronology or recorded history that can validate these names. The only affirmative basis that the Nuru and the Okeke have is a circular conviction that the Great Book confirms these differences.

An additional irony about the Great Book is that in contrast to many patriarchal-based, Western religions, a female deity, Ani the Creator, sits at the center of the Great Book. Even though the central point of authority in the Great Book is a woman, Nuru men degrade Okeke women and other Nuru women alike, claiming that these gruesome acts are in accordance with Ani's wishes. I take the disparity between the reverence of a female figurehead, and the cruel treatment of women in everyday life as Okorafor's own commentary on the failings of conventional female strength. Ani proves that gendered notions of strength that romanticize women as goddesses and queens are all on the same side of sexism. These ideas don't reflect women's experiences of trauma, nor do they compel a radical turn-over of society. Instead these tropes present an illusion of female empowerment, that actually serves the needs and wants of a male-centered world, demonstrating that being exalted as a deity is just as destructive to the lives of real women as being degraded. Onyesonwu's criticism of Ani and the Great Book as a "weak human idea" is necessary (301-302). Nonetheless, to reject one form of female strength, while

clinging to the hyper-ability of the Strong Black Woman is a contradiction. The inhuman stalwartness of the Strong Black Woman is just as oppressive as Ani.

The text positions Onyesonwu as the heroic answer to Ani's failings, as she comes to re-write the very embodiment of Ani, the Great Book. Onyesonwu's destruction of the Great Book and creation of an entirely new text is the pivotal climax of *Who Fears Death* that is a spectacle of bodily self-sacrifice. The way that her body supernaturally and violently produces text illustrates the magnitude and transformative quality of the moment. In recalling her composition of the revised text, Onyesonwu notes, "my hand grew hot and I saw the symbols on my right-hand split. The duplicates dribbled down into the book where they settled between the other symbols into a script. I still couldn't read. I could feel the book sucking from me, as a child does from its mother's breasts. Taking and taking. I felt something click within my womb. I stopped singing." (377). Okorafor challenges the esteem of the written word in this moment, by juxtaposing Onyesonwu's book with components traditionally understood as counterintuitive, and even inferior to literature, notably the physical body and the orality of song. Karin Barber affirms that the "oral tradition" is often presented as "precursor and background, out of which modern anglophone written literature somehow emerged or grew" (7). Barber defines the divide between orality and the written word as not only a cultural wedge, but a stand-in for the assumed differences between blackness and whiteness, which I gesture towards in order to express the magnitude of this scene and the way that Okorafor pushes against master narratives of colonization. Additionally, the metaphoric reference to Onyesonwu's book as a nursing child turns writing into a physical and maternal act that women have unlimited access to, in contrast to the masculine idealization of writing as an isolated, cerebral act that only a select few can

perform. Ironically, even though Onyesonwu criticizes Ani as a limiting idea, she presents here a maternalistic, gendered strength just like the goddess, and becomes what she once despised.

Onyesonwu's physical prowess clearly situates her as a feminist supercrip, but her self-sacrifice is her final act of heroism that situates her as a martyr. Following her final fight and her re-writing of the Great Book, Onyesonwu meets her fate and is stoned to death. As a direct consequence of her murder, women across the region, Nuru and Okeke alike, acquire countless supernatural skills. The narrator notes that women were given "thousands of abilities…There it was. Onye's gift. In the death of herself and her child, Onye gave birth to us all. This place will never be the same. Slavery here is over" (Okorafor 381). This ending is somewhat formulaic and neatly ties up all the conflict in *Who Fears Death*. Onyesonwu's re-writing of the Great Book is her culminating moment as a feminist supercrip. Instead of hindering her, her differences aid Onyesonwu in saving all women across the region. In identifying *Who Fears Death* as a feminist text, critics like Jones write that "the source of women's power [in the novel] lies in the reproductive potential of all women" (85). However, the way disability intersects with gender in this scene is seldom recognized, as it isn't maternalism alone that saves the women, but Onyesonwu's effort to gift women her supercrip abilities. Okorafor seems to suggest that women's power truly lies in bodily difference. Onyesonwu's murder and the fallout of her death on the one hand, closely parallel the conventional supercrip because she is able to accomplish what's virtually impossible. She performs the outrageously immense task of liberating the marginalized in her region. On the other hand, Onyesonwu simultaneously complicates this figure by breaking down the barrier between herself and the masses in giving these women her talents. Life and death are juxtaposed as Onyesonwu perishes, but in the process, she becomes a maternal figure metaphorically giving birth to several supercrips just like herself. While female

leaders are often loosely referred to in maternal terms instead of gender-neutral language, Okorafor seems to intend for readers to view Onyesonwu as a maternal figurehead of her own movement because there are so many mother figures throughout *Who Fears Death*. Whether we consider Ani or Najeeba, there is a pattern in *Who Fears Death* of mothers who can't protect themselves nor their children, namely their daughters from the violence of men. Despite the power that the mother wields in perpetuating a legacy and heritage through the nurturing of her children, with many of the mother figures in *Who Fears Death*, Okorafor seems to suggest that this nurturing isn't enough and it doesn't protect daughters from the subjugation of a sexist society. Onyesonwu, by comparison, is the embodiment of the Strong Black Woman and she is therefore able to do the impossible. She not only defends women, but she literally imbues in them her own powers, so that even when she is no longer present in the text, they have the agency to protect themselves and impact the Seven Rivers Kingdom beyond motherhood.

Burnett cites the connection of Onyesonwu's bodymind to the re-writing of the Great Book as a realization of "the written word's postcolonial liberatory potential is finally revealed. The Ewu couple, created by and within the terms of the conflict they seek to end and pushed to the margins of society by the very nature of that creation, become an embodied counter-discourse to the hegemonic rhetoric that has literally and figuratively produced them" (146). The potential for postcolonial discourse that Burnett identifies in Onyesonwu's embodiment of the written word seems to play with Audre Lorde's adage of using the master's tools to tear down the master's house.[30] What's implied is that the written word houses the means for people of color to liberate themselves. Burnett is right to think about *Who Fears Death* in terms of its

[30] For further discussion, see Lorde 110-114.

contribution to postcolonial discourse. After all, this novel does take a provocative look at issues developing nations currently face like intra-racial conflict and the global tech race. However, if critics are going to discuss Onyesonwu's embodiment, focusing on race isn't adequate when her greatest act of embodied resistance is her self-sacrifice.

While the text presents Onyesonwu's death as courageous, I find that this moment demonstrates that the supercrip can not only perfectly mirror the Strong Black Woman, but at its worst, it can perpetuate the most toxic qualities of this trope. By sharing her gifts with the other women, and sacrificing her life, Onyesonwu alludes to the Strong Black Woman, and her willingness to over-exert herself at the service of others' needs. Onyesonwu merely manifests the famed selflessness of the Strong Black Woman in a magical context. Although this martyrdom is noble, in one instance, it offers no space for individual, humanizing desires. More importantly, this extreme selflessness normalizes the idea that it isn't only black women's sole responsibility to hold a community up, but in order to do so, they must give their bodyminds and their lives for the greater good of the collective. While white male supercrips in fantasy novels use their powers to save others, and in return they get to live to pursue other adventures, as a black female supercrip, Onyesonwu's heroism is in her death, which in a problematic sense further normalizes the banality of excessive black death rather than challenging it. Onyesonwu ultimately shows that if you perform the Strong Black Woman to extremes, if you demonstrate absolute fortitude, absolute bravery, demonstrate no vulnerability, no apprehension, and no fear—you lose a sense of humanity and you become a vessel of martyrdom for the collective. Onyesonwu illustrates that the Strong Black Woman in her most extreme form is so self-less to the point that her self literally ceases to exist, and the only reality she has left to face is death. The way that

Onyesonwu's fate connects to a death-bound overdetermination because of her faithful performance of conventional strength, demonstrates the toxicity of this archetype.

III.

A puzzling distinction between *Who Fears Death* and *Parable of the Sower* is that both texts centralize a bodily variant character, yet *Sower* in many regards is an anti-traditionalist text that rejects many conventional forms of authority, from the Strong Black Woman to motherhood. By contrast, Onyesonwu in *Who Fears* is the embodiment of Jenkins' salvific wish. According to Jenkins, "the salvific wish is best understood as an aspiration, most often but not only middle-class and female, to save or rescue the black community from white racist accusations of sexual and domestic pathology, through the embrace of conventional bourgeois propriety" (973). The salvific wish is a naturalized expectation for black women to protect the black community through a performance of respectability. The salvific wish dictates that black women have the power to correct racist representations of blackness and lascivious and criminal by presenting in public not only a sexual purity, but exemplary skills as mothers, wives, and overall caregivers. While Onyesonwu doesn't become a mother or a wife in the duration of *Who Fears*, and she shows greater interest in protecting black women rather than the larger black community, she still echoes the base desire of salvific wish to self-sacrifice as a strategy for fighting against prejudices. Whereas the black women in Jenkins' salvific wish sacrificed their own sexuality and aspirations outside of the domestic space, Onyesonwu sacrifices her bodymind and her life. As I will discuss in greater detail in this section, Lauren comes to reject all aspects of maternalism and the self-sacrifice that is entailed viewing it as toxic, and a romanticized fantasy completely incompatible with reality and the urgency and chaos of the times. Ultimately,-Lauren's refusal to

perform the role of savior allows her to provocatively trouble naturalized assumptions about morality and black womanhood that conventional supercrips like Onyesonwu are unable to.

In fact, the hyper-realism Butler constructs that bucks tradition parallels Quayson's theory of "aesthetic nervousness," in which "the embarrassment, fear, and confusion that attend[s] the disabled in their everyday reality… is translated in literature… into a series of structural devices that betray themselves when the disability representation is seen predominantly from the perspective of the disabled" (205). To elaborate on aesthetic nervousness, this is a quality Quayson identifies in texts that center a disabled character. In these texts, character qualities and themes that would be considered non-normative by ableist standards become the norm in the world of the text. Consequently, non-linear storytelling, and often what comes close to aporia ensues, where the conflict of the text may not be resolved. The protagonist may not achieve the goal they set out to accomplish. Furthermore, interactions between the disabled protagonist and able-bodied secondary and tertiary characters occur to illustrate for readers underlying assumptions that the able-bodied make about the disabled. In other words, rather than illustrate discourse and action between a disabled character and an able-bodied character in order to belittle or fetishize the disabled, as is the case with many mainstream texts, these interactions suggest more about the able-bodied and their attitudes about difference than the disabled.

For Therí Pickens, a notable structural device in Butler's work that correlates with aesthetic nervousness is the plot, which "alienates those who have no experience navigating power in the same way her [disabled] characters do" (176). By making black female characters with bodily differences the protagonists, Butler makes people of color subjects of the text rather than objects or worse, entirely absent. I would also add that in *Sower*, Lauren's control over her

narrative further reinforces her complex subjecthood. The *Parable* series is written in the first-person perspective of Lauren and it is comprised of several diary-style entries. Often when marginalized characters are written in the third person, the marginalized aspect of their identity is isolated and becomes the heart of the work. Because Lauren recounts her story, readers witness her fully actualized experiences. Narrative control and the emphasis on fully actualized identity and experiences are major reasons why Lauren can deviate from the one-dimensional characteristics of the supercrip and the Strong Black Woman.

Earthseed and the disability that informs it, hyperempathy, further prove Quayson's aesthetic nervousness by reshaping how we define morality. A central characteristic of many world religions is an internal sense of ethics that people either consciously choose or don't choose from one situation to the next. In a pessimistic sense, what's implicit in Earthseed is the acceptance that humanity has refrained from that internal moral code, and chaos has surfaced as a result. Consequently, Lauren imagines hyperempathy as a solution to the instability of the times. She reasons that, "if everyone could feel everyone else's pain, who would torture? Who would cause anyone unnecessary pain? I've never thought of my problem as something that might do some good before, but the way things are, I think it would help. I wish I could give it to people... A biological conscience is better than no conscience at all" (Butler 115). According to Lauren, if everyone had hyperempathy—making it the norm instead of an instance of bodily difference—much of the violence in the world would cease because people wouldn't want to subject themselves to the pain. While Lauren envisions utopic possibilities within the present, anarchic moment, what complicates this euphoric peace is the fact that this sense of human good is biologically determined and not a conscious decision. The quandary that Lauren's commentary raises is that a person with a biologically determined or compulsory conscience isn't necessarily

a morally upstanding person. A subject with hyperempathy may very well harbor violent thoughts; however, their bodymind prohibits them from acting on these urges.

The compulsory conscience that Lauren proposes interestingly deviates from the ideal inviolate heroine and opens ontological possibilities for black women. As Lauren and her followers travel up north, they contend with scavengers setting fires and stealing from other travelers. Lauren and an eventual Earthseed follower, Harry, kill two scavengers who try to rob their group. This incident creates tension between Lauren and Harry because Lauren "had killed a man in a much more cold-blooded way, according to him, and it didn't bother me. But my 'cold-bloodedness' bothered him. He wasn't a sharer. He didn't understand that to me pain was the evil. Death was an end to pain. No Bible verses were going to change that as far as I was concerned" (198-199). The way that Lauren's behavior disturbs Harry captures the troubling core of compulsory conscience—its amoralism. Those who have hyperempathy perform good deeds out of physical need rather than compassion or morality. Violence is similarly inflicted for the sake of survival without any remorse. Part of why hyperempathy is so disconcerting is its crude prioritization of self-preservation over any ideal of a greater good as opposed to the prioritization of community that we see in *Who Fears Death*. With hyperempathy, there is no good/evil dichotomy that human choice upholds. As Lauren asserts, the only evil is the experience of pain. This disability abandons any possibilities of a benevolent humanity that overcomes corruption to do good, and forces outsiders like Harry, as well as readers, to take a starkly realist, even pessimistic view of humanity and therefore, themselves.

When we consider the crossing of both race and disability in Harry's criticism of Lauren, his disapproval suggests a double standard common in popular misrepresentations of black women. They both have committed murder, yet Lauren's violent act is ostensibly worse in

Harry's eyes because she kills without affect. Ultimately, it's not the murder that is the problem, because it's committed out of necessity, but it's Lauren's lack of socially appropriate emotion. Wanzo makes a similar observation about the novel's interrogation of emotion, and what's deemed appropriate or inappropriate, noting that what's "on trial" in the novel "is not only feeling in itself but 'right feeling'…the ways [Lauren] removes a language of feeling from her political directives makes feeling a prerequisite for her politics-even as she does not see empathy as the key to curing all of society's problems. Butler's resistance to making feeling a cure-all marks this text as postsentimental" (77). I highlight this claim from Wanzo because I agree that *Sower* is a post-sentimental text. Even though *Sower* is an apocalyptic text where the world comes undone, Butler avoids presenting any lofty notions of universal family bonded in agape love as the ultimate solution. Ultimately, it's hyperempathy and Earthseed that save characters in the book not sentimental love or peace. However, I also think that scholars can't separate feeling from moralism in the way that Wanzo does here. Lauren is equally judged for her seeming lack of ethics as she is for her lack of emotion. What seems to disturb other characters is her inability or refusal to know right from wrong and consequently show the appropriate emotion when she has done wrong. Moralism and sentimentalism go hand-in-hand. And Lauren dismisses both as illusory and not grounded in reality.

To further complicate Wanzo's point, *Sower* seems to not only suggest a proverbial death of sentimentalism in literature, but it also suggests that sentimentalism is something black women should abandon because it is a perpetual lose-lose situation. When we see how quickly Harry is prepared to read Lauren as heartless, it's clear that affect bears no rhetorical fruit for black women. Too much affect quickly becomes misread as unpredictability. Meanwhile an absence of emotion can potentially become a monstrous disavowal of the Strong Black Woman.

Trudier Harris similarly examines Lauren's seeming coldness and concludes that her "superstrength" is toxic because she "imposes her will subtly at times and directly at other times, kills without conscience, and has eliminated any sense of guilt from her personality…Will such characters always be wrapped primarily in auras of external necessity that shape their interactions?" (171). Harris characterizes Lauren as a dictatorial figure, and her strength as a domineering quality that, in accordance with a self-centered need to survive, strips her of morality. While Lauren certainly assumes a strong leadership role in her community of followers, to declare that her strength makes her an unredeemable character potentially reiterates the historical and continued dehumanization of black women as innately different from gendered standards and therefore deviant. Harris's and Harry's summations of Lauren overlook the way that disability informs some of her actions. Hyperempathy, and the need to survive, forces Lauren to distance herself from any violent acts she must commit. This disability is the 'external necessity' that Harris seems to dismiss; however, it's a primary cause for Lauren's seeming callousness, not some internal moral blunder. Harris's criticism of Lauren demonstrates the importance of considering how disability shapes seemingly strong characters. Ultimately, the fact that *Sower* is narrated from Lauren's perspective, rather than an outsider like Harry, provocatively disrupts this pattern of demonizing black female emotion (or lack thereof). Readers understand that Lauren isn't a cold-blooded villain, and that her hyperempathy forces her to maintain a level of detachment amidst instances of violence. Because Butler centers *Sower* around a disabled character's perspective, disability complicates what would otherwise be another iteration of the bad black woman. It's important to underscore that hyperempathy, and by extension, disability, provide nuance, and a way out of racialized and gendered overdetermination for Lauren. Furthermore, to extend the rhetorical impact of disability further,

hyperempathy in *Sower* not only attributes to Lauren's characterization, but it also upsets reader expectations for the noble heroine that we see in *Who Fears Death*.

In contrast to Onyesonwu's imitation of the Strong Black Woman, in *Parable of the Sower,* Lauren rejects this figure, along with any fantasies of a self-sacrificing heroism. Throughout *Parable,* Lauren is an anti-hero like Eva Peace in Toni Morrison's *Sula*. She doesn't have any delusions about her ability to save others, and her overall outlook on humanity is a pessimistic one, believing that morals and ethics are all but dead. At a surface level, everything about Lauren is the exact opposite of the Strong Black Woman. But the way that Butler refrains from bending to stereotypical expectations of black female heroism opens space for a protagonist that embraces her vulnerabilities and bypasses death as a consequence. My objective in my analysis is to see how Butler establishes a happy medium between the resiliency of the Strong Black Woman and the fragility of disability in order to make Lauren a culminating example of the productivity in using disability as a lens in African American literature.

While a fascist government and Global Warming all add to the mayhem in *Sower,* what I locate at the heart of the chaos is the tension between the past and the future. For readers, there is a dissimilarity to the world of *Parable of the Sower* because it is an imagined futurity. Nonetheless, key issues around race and class connect back to the past and our collective socio-historical memory. Scholars identify this juxtaposition of the past and the future as not only a characteristic of speculative fiction as a genre, but also an effort on the author's part to make a political statement about the times they write within. Sean Brayton points out that "the classic dystopia," a sub-genre of speculative fiction, "extrapolate[s] the particular social climate in which the author worked into a 'utopian' future where the hubris of the present became magnified to the point of calamity" (67). R.B. Gill builds on this understanding of speculative

fiction as a social commentary by adding that the "alternative worlds" writers create often "will comment on this world—negatively to satirize its shortcomings, or positively to provide a model for emulation, as in some utopias" (81). While speculative fiction crafts timely social commentaries, critics have failed to hold this white-dominated genre accountable for its lack of discussion about race relations, nor have scholars articulated interest in race as a theme that merits discussion. *Sower* is therefore such an important work because Butler frames time through the lens of race.

Even though enslaved black subjects aren't present in *Sower*, the neglect of Lauren's neighborhood Robledo in the text, makes readers very aware of the exploitation of black labor in the past. Rather than simply invert the white/master black/enslaved subject binary— amidst the anarchy, the exploitive labor that KSF offers is constructed as a means of relief that communities of color are largely excluded from. Lauren recounts how disappointed she initially was when KSF passed over working with her neighborhood, Robledo because it's "too big, too poor, too black, and too Hispanic to be of interest to anyone—and it has no coastline. What it does have is street poor, body dumps, and a memory of once being well-off—of shade trees, big houses, hills, and canyons. Most of those things are still here, but no company will want us" (Butler 120). The implicit message here that communities of color like Robledo are unfit to labor for massive corporations like KSF is ironic because the historic power dynamic of labor demonstrates the exact opposite. During periods of technological advancement, practical matters like the construction and establishment of technology has only been able to occur because of the grueling labor of the most marginalized communities—notably, working class, disenfranchised people of color. The disparity in the treatment of communities like Robledo and Olivar, suggests that when exploitation is accompanied with the preservation of community and the family unit, rather than

dehumanization, people of color are seemingly unfit to do the work and consequently overlooked. By suggesting that Robledo is "too big, too poor, too black, and too Hispanic" to be employable in the eyes of KSF, Butler draws critical attention to the black and Latinx labor force that the US infrastructure has depended on, even as they are scattered and dismissed.

The contrast in treatment of communities like Olivar and Robledo insinuates that the only enfranchised labor that people of color can turn to even amidst social unraveling, is work that is demoralizing. Notably with Natividad, one of Lauren's eventual Earthseed followers, she doesn't sell her labor to a massive corporation like KSF, but she lives out the sexual exploitation black female slaves endured in slave narratives, from Harriet Jacobs in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) to Aunt Hester in Frederick Douglass' *Narrative in the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845). Before meeting Lauren along her journey to northern California, Natividad was a maid to a wealthy white family, and regularly subjected to the unwanted sexual advances of the husband. She quickly marries the cook's son to try to stave off her boss's sexual attention. In an act of sympathy, the matriarch of the house helps them leave the job for Natividad to avoid being raped. Upon hearing Natividad's harrowing story, Lauren recalls the similar ordeals black enslaved women faced and marvels, "the son of the cook marrying one of the maids. That was like something out of another era…[Natividad] had been lucky…How many other people were less lucky—unable to escape the master's attentions or gain the mistress's sympathies. How far did masters and mistresses go these days toward putting less than submissive servants in their places" (219). The way Natividad disrupts the familiar trope of slave sexual exploitation means that black characters like Lauren are spared exploitive degradation. Lauren essentially doesn't have to perform strength in the face of abuse and sexual assault. Butler provocatively moves

readers away from the black female victim/exploitive white taskmaster binary of the past, and in so doing, frees Lauren from the task of playing the resilient Strong Black Woman.

What seems to both haunt and frame Natividad's experiences are the abused bodyminds of enslaved black women. Enslaved ancestors are both present and absent in *Sower* because they may not be the maid or the slave labor in the moment, but the memory of their pain makes the experiences of characters like Natividad or the town of Olivar legible to Lauren. Saidiya Hartman refers to enduring legacy as the afterlife of slavery. She asserts that "if slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of a too-long memory, but because black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago" (Hartman 6). Some scholars theorize that the theme of slavery in African American literary texts functions as an instance of trauma that nonetheless exists distinctively in the past as memory. Hartman's argument suggests that slavery is not only a memory from the past, but it is also a living, breathing legacy that descendants continue to be bound to in the present moment. Thus, the afterlife or death of slavery is its ironic and insidious persistence in the institutions and daily lives of descendants. The theme of slavery in *Sower* offers another illustration of the afterlife of slavery where descendants don't necessarily live out slavery, but they instead witness its re-surfacing. Rather than enfold Natividad as a non-black woman into the history of enslaved African Americans, by connecting non-black characters to slavery, Butler seems to make the case that U.S. chattel slavery isn't just a legacy exclusive to African Americans. African Americans should not have to bear the burden of remembering slavery alone. She seems to suggest that chattel slavery is a national trauma that every citizen regardless of race is a part of

and affected by. Thus, the afterlife of slavery in *Sower* haunts every subject, not just African Americans.

While *Sower* creates a world where the Strong Black Woman isn't needed, her counterpart, the black patriarch is similarly removed from the text. As a Baptist minister, Lauren's father is the primary black patriarchal figure in *Sower,* and he alludes to the male-centered leadership that's played an integral part in black American history. In *Charisma and the Fictions of Black Leadership,* Erica Edwards highlights this enrapturing charisma as the characteristic that ties black patriarchal leaders across history. According to Edwards, "charisma…is an ideal that situates authority, or the right to rule, in one exceptional figure perceived to be gifted with a privileged connection to the divine. The charismatic leader is both gifted and a gift himself: he is given divine authority and power, given to the people, and given for the sake of historical change" (16). The charismatic black leader has a divine right of sorts. Because he's eloquent and charming, all the hopes for socioeconomic equality are placed on his shoulders, and he's tasked with the responsibility of representing the best of blackness and advocating for black progress. While the plight of the charismatic black leader has been romanticized in the mainstream, because of his singular authority, the face of black struggle has been heteronormative masculinity at the expense of other more diverse experiences. This tendency to dominate the master narrative of blackness is what charismatic black leaders have in common with the Strong Black Woman. Together, these two erase non-normative bodyminds like Lauren.

We know very little about Lauren's father, other than that his age is the inverse of Lauren's age.[31] Because Lauren never reveals his name, he has no sense of identity outside of her. This lack of individuality illustrates Lauren's father's existence as her doppelganger. Our first glimpse of her father is a baptism he performs on her that appears coerced, as she recalls "at least three years ago, my father's God stopped being my God. His church stopped being my church. And yet, today, because I'm a coward, I let myself be initiated into that church" (Butler 7). As opposed to the intense emotion that accompanies scenes of spiritual awakening like a baptism, this moment is dismal. There is no radical interior transformation that Lauren experiences during this rite of passage. These Christian traditions don't speak to her needs and wants, and they don't offer her any comfort during a time of societal upheaval. Therefore, Lauren's father, as a minister, symbolizes the extent that Christianity in *Sower* becomes a relic of the past completely irrelevant to the urgency of the times.

Lauren's rejection of Christianity contradicts its place as a mainstay in African American culture historically. However, with the presumed murder of her father, Butler suggests that Christianity cannot serve as a means of survival and resistance, as it has in the past. Soon after neighboring communities begin leasing out their labor to KSF for economic security, Lauren's father goes missing. He never resurfaces again in the novel, with exception to the discovery of a detached arm in a field close to Lauren's family home. It's never clear whether or not these are the remains of Lauren's father, but in an eerie tone, she notes how the arm "was fresh and whole…A black man's arm, just the color of my father's where color could be seen. It was slashed and cut all over, yet still powerful looking—long-boned, long-fingered, yet muscular and

[31] Lauren is 15 years old as previously mentioned, and her father is 51 years old.

massive…Familiar?" (131). The fact that the disappearance of Lauren's father is anti-climactic and even dehumanizing, as what might be fragments of his body are discarded like trash, all suggest that the crises of this dystopic world have gutted the authority of organized religion. Because African American leadership has historically been rooted in the church, the disappearance of Lauren's father seems to further suggest that this top-down, patriarchal approach is a dying tradition like organized religion, and must be abandoned at all costs.

Because Lauren is marked by disability, along with race and gender, her access to white masculinity is cut off, but she is also freed from the task of imitating or aspiring to it as the charismatic black leader does, which spells out her survival in contrast to her father's destruction. This positionality gives Lauren a unique vantage point, in which she can embrace vulnerability and change, and avoid victimization. *Sower* provocatively suggests that the disability that makes Lauren different is also what enables her to contend with the havoc of the moment, most notably by creating her principle system. Lauren's Earthseed similarly transforms the binary dynamic between humanity and God. The fundamental building block of Earthseed is the ironic constancy of change when it comes to both the physical and the divine world. Adam Johns adds that "despite the condition of her world," Lauren "believes in transformation" rather than endings (403), and the impetus on change in Earthseed reflects this perception of life as circular. In theorizing Earthseed, Lauren contends that like the God of Christian doctrine, "God is power, and in the end God prevails. But we can rig the game in our own favor if we understand that God exists to be shaped, and will be shaped, with or without our forethought, with or without our intent" (Butler 25). Earthseed ultimately gives greater agency to people and makes religion more democratic. This value system gets rid of the top-down approach in Western religion where you have a distant, patriarchal God wielding immeasurable power, and a

meek humanity, with no agency, completely subject to the acts and decisions of a deity. With Earthseed, the power dynamic between humanity and God is mutually constitutive. There is not a distant deity that is fixed and therefore incomprehensible. The God of Earthseed changes and impacts humanity, and humanity in turn changes and impacts God.

Through Earthseed, Lauren creates her own microcosm in which Otherized subjects like herself, and those who align with the belief system become the normative. With change as the baseline of *Sower* and Earthseed, according to Marlene D. Allen, people are no longer "outsiders because of their biological nature (i.e., what they are racially or sexually), but rather because of how they think, that is, their unwillingness to accept difference and the inherence of change" (1359). While Butler's decision to center marginalized subjects challenges what it means to be an Other (1359), normativity remains intact as an organizing principle with assumed value. Those who conventionally occupy the position of the deviant and the normal simply reverse roles in this context. Although this switch doesn't eliminate the normative/deviant binary, with change as the basis of Earthseed, a subject's approximation to the norm is only a matter of conviction rather than the state of their body. The predominance of chaotic change in the dystopic world Lauren lives in as well as Earthseed suggest that a greater, more democratic representation of subjects can be incorporated into the center when normativity is rooted in change.

Lauren's father fails to protect her, but her mother is also largely absent from the novel, and I attribute the dysfunction associated with Lauren's mother to the rejection of the Strong Black Woman in *Sower*. There has been a substantial amount of theoretical work on the significance of Lauren's father to *Sower* and the development of Earthseed; however, not enough attention has been paid to Lauren's mother. I attribute the dearth of commentary on Lauren's mother to the practical fact that unlike the father, she is never physically present in the novel, and

Lauren only makes a couple references to her. She mentions how her mother is a tremendous embarrassment to her father that he prefers to keep a secret. According to Lauren, "there's a whole range of things we never even hint about outside the family. First among these is anything about my mother, my hyperempathy, and how the two are connected. To my father, the whole business is shameful…A first wife who was a drug addict and a daughter who is drug damaged is not something he wants to boast about" (Butler 12).

Hyperempathy, in turn, clearly signifies with the racialized discourse of drug use when Lauren meets other sharers, or people who possess hyperempathy like herself, and they recount their experiences. One sharer details the predominance of drug use and the resulting medical complications, noting "'where I was born, everybody's mama took drugs—and whored to pay for them. And had babies all the time and threw them away like trash when they died" (192). The tableau that this sharer paints of her neighborhood echoes the stereotypes of black inner-city life as a space rife with dysfunction. While we have no backstory on Lauren's mother because she used Paracetco during her pregnancy, to some extent she aligns with these other Paracetco users as deviant black mothers. Hinton suggests that hyperempathy draws a connection between deviant black motherhood and disability that causes "Lauren [to] never separate being disabled from becoming disabled, which reinforces the connection between bad black motherhood and disability. Specifically, Lauren's mother's story recalls the controlling image of the crack mother by positioning Lauren as a crack baby of sorts" (446-447). Hinton makes a distinction between being disabled and becoming disabled which is key. Although the two appear similar, to be disabled means that the subject has accepted their impairment as a part of their being. By contrast, becoming disabled turns impairment into a repeating process rather than an identity. If a character is constantly in a state of becoming disabled, there are continuously grappling with the

events that led to their impairment as a trauma that they never come to terms with, and never integrate into their sense of self. On the one hand I agree that Lauren associates her disability with her mother, and that this association is a part of the larger pattern in *Sower* of linking motherhood to deviance. However, by identifying herself as a sharer, finding community with other sharers, and basing Earthseed around hyperempathy, all suggests that Lauren integrates hyperempathy into her identity and her worldview. Her mother's drug use while pregnant alludes to the commonly held narrative of black mothers as "crack mothers" that I discussed in chapter one. This narrative dictated that irresponsible black mothers were to blame for such a sweeping structural issue as the crack epidemic, and that their reckless drug use was presumably producing an exponentially high number of "crack babies" that threatened the survival of the black community. Hyperempathy demonstrates that at the heart of hysteria over black drug use is anxiety over disability and the fear of black women producing disabled children who grow up to become societal leeches, unable to work.

Ultimately, *Parable of the Sower* features less than ideal mothers to suggest that there is little redemptive potential for women in gendered domestic roles like motherhood or by extension, the Strong Black Woman. Whether we consider Lauren's mother, who dies in childbirth, or the many nameless servant women Lauren references who are sexually exploited, impregnated, and discarded, motherhood in *Sower* is at times linked to disability, but more importantly a literal and metaphoric death. Part of why motherhood is toxic in *Sower* is because so many women are dependent on men who objectify them. Lauren mentions that because there is so much uncertainty, men like her neighbor, Richard Moss, take advantage of women who are fearful for the future. Her neighbor goes as far as to:

> Put together his own religion—a combination of the Old Testament and historical West

> African practices. He claims that God wants men to be patriarchs, rulers and protectors of women, and fathers of as many children as possible… Some upper-class men prove they're men by having one wife and a lot of beautiful, disposable young servant girls. Nasty. When the girls get pregnant, if their rich employers won't protect them, the employers' wives throw them out to starve. Is that the way it's going to be, I wonder? (Butler 36-37)

The outlook for women in *Sower* is rather bleak. For the sake of having some sense of stability, women cling to old world notions of gender roles where they have the option to either be bound to the house with no outlets for self-expression or they can be a sexual play-thing. Either way, their fate is dependency on men who view them all as disposable. Like the women of Jwahir, the women in *Sower* are greatly subjugated. Where Onyesonwu takes it upon herself to become the supercrip and the Strong Black Woman, sacrificing her life to right the inequality, Lauren not only rejects motherhood, and by extension the Strong Black Woman for herself, but she is highly critical of these women who opt to depend on a man. For instance, when she finds out one of her friends is pregnant, she scoffs "how in the world can anyone get married and make babies with things the way they are now…Bianca's chosen life is one of my options. It's not one that I intend to exercise, but it is pretty much what the neighborhood expects of me—of anyone my age" (87). Here, Lauren is somewhat unlikeable because she is so judgmental towards other women. Rather than show some understanding of their precarious situations, Lauren victim-blames and quickly writes these women off as nonsensical. The irony of her judgment against the women is that so often, her disabled bodymind is similarly characterized. Jones writes that "both her mental impairment and belief system mark Olamina as pathologically 'crazy,' positioned as dangerous diseases of the brain" (124). Just as Lauren dismisses these young women's strategies

for surviving as foolish, her experience of others' feelings, the hyperempathy that she builds Earthseed around to survive, is frequently rejected as madness. Lauren can feel other people's pain. Yet, in this instance, she refuses to extend this embodied empathy for these women. These character flaws make Lauren a more human supercrip than Onyesonwu, who always has the right and just response regardless of the situation. Furthermore, Lauren's lack of likeability illustrates her place as an anti-hero.

Because Lauren rejects motherhood and the Strong Black Woman, she can present her own unique strength rooted in vulnerability. Scholars frequently read Lauren within the terms of the Strong Black Woman, but this argument overlooks the many complexities with this character. In one such example, Diana Leong imagines Lauren as a sacrifice for the sake of Earthseed, asserting that she is frequently reduced to "black female flesh" for the sake of "Earthseed's development into a global movement. In this context, Lauren's black life, or the blackness of her life, matters, but only in its ambivalent capacity to make all lives matter" (22). Although Lauren builds up Earthseed into her own following and has a significant hand in determining its growth and direction, this interpretation unintentionally undercuts her agency. Leong shifts Lauren from an active leadership role to a passive sacrificial black life, subjecting herself to dehumanization in order to save "all lives."

If we take a more measured approach to analysis of Lauren, it will become apparent that she isn't a romanticized selfless heroine. In many ways Lauren is an anti-hero and she makes it clear early on that her intentions with Earthseed aren't to save the world or sacrifice herself for any noble cause as Onyesonwu does. For instance, when Lauren discusses Earthseed with her lover, Bankole, amazed by the grand scale of her goals, Bankole scoffs and asks Lauren, "'Going to fix the world, are you?' he said with quiet amusement…For a moment I was too angry to let

myself speak. When I could control my voice, I said, 'It's all right if you don't believe, but don't laugh. Do you know what it means to have something to believe in…Fixing the world is not what Earthseed is about" (Butler 275-276). Lauren openly rejects the stereotypical expectation for black women to be saviors for everyone around them. According to Philip Jos, hyperempathy is a significant reason as to why Lauren takes this stance because it "is a measure of Butler's psychological and political realism that only a few are "sharers" of others' suffering. She does not offer a political reform agenda intended to engender compassion in all people, but those who can share in the experiences of others in the community are called to a life of action" (423). The idea that "only a few are 'sharers'" like Lauren implies that intentionally or not, hyperempathy is exclusionary by nature. Only a few will have hyperempathy, and consequently only a few will be spared the suffering of a dystopic world, while the rest of humanity presumably perishes. Thus, the disabled, and those who prescribe themselves to Earthseed (therefore situating themselves as approximate to disability) save each other rather than saving the able-bodied as the romanticized supercrip often dictates. Even though she creates her own principle system and establishes her own community, consequently sparing people the anguish of the times, Lauren openly rebuffs being associated with any iteration of the Strong Black Woman, nonetheless the supercrip. The irony here is that Lauren, to an extent is a supercrip who refuses to be defined as such. Phillips highlights that unlike Lauren's family and the anonymous towns that sign up to work with KSF, Lauren is the only person from her former life who "genuinely transcends the 'chaos' without, because she understands that only by working through the contradictions of the world does one move beyond them" (303). Rather than be fearful of the outside world, and hide away from it in fear, as her neighbors and family do, Lauren is the only person from Robledo to openly venture outside of this gated community, and take on the mayhem to not only survive, but flourish. To

thrust herself into the chaos of outside takes a level of courage and agility, that's not as obvious and supernaturally miraculous as Onyesonwu's abilities but is nonetheless the heroism of the supercrip.

Lauren is a unique supercrip in the sense that she is an unlikely heroine. She doesn't possess any larger-than-life, supernatural abilities that make her superhuman like Onyesonwu. However, Lauren's supercrip power is her tenacity and her ability to find the strength during difficult times to wade things out and survive. Because this relentlessness is a quality that anyone can possess, there is a greater sense of humanity and relatability to Lauren's representation of the supercrip. We see the value Lauren places on relentlessness when she preaches at a father's church after they find his discarded arm. Rather than preach a predictable sermon about conquering adversity, she preaches a sermon about weakness, "the parable of the importunate widow. It's one I've always liked. A widow is so persistent in her demands for justice that she overcomes the resistance of a judge who fears neither God nor man. She wears him down. Moral: The weak can overcome the strong if the weak persist. Persisting isn't always safe, but it's often necessary" (134). Lauren's alignment with the weak rather than the strong can be interpreted as a clear rejection of heroic fortitude like that of the Strong Black Woman. Interestingly, as a supercrip, she isn't boasting about her abilities or her power. In an instance of humility, Lauren identifies herself as weak. But her strength lies in her perseverance and her ability to stick out tough times and survive them. She locates a bravery in perseverance that it isn't always the optimum option. Perseverance isn't the characteristic readers would intuitively associate with a supercrip or any heroine for that matter. A supercrip doesn't stick things out in the long-term. Supercrip narratives are jam-packed with action, quick changes, and quick results. Lauren's emphasis on slow, purposeful plodding and surviving complicates this trope.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined the supercrip protagonists of *Parable of the Sower* and *Who Fears Death* in hopes of compelling further conversation about the supercrip in disability studies and impairment in African American literature. Lauren Olamina and Onyesonwu may be more unfamiliar than popular white male supercrips. However, these characters prove that the supercrip holds redemptive potential once we look past white heteronormative representations. In fact, rather than table the entire trope as ableist and unredeemable for its reduction of access barriers to a matter of individual willpower, Lauren and Onyesonwu prove that scholars must take a more measured strategy and consider how the supercrip changes from text to text and most importantly from body to body. To continue to lambast the supercrip, when black female authors like Butler manage to situate black supercrips and their narratives of bodily difference into culturally rich contexts, inadvertently prioritizes white voices within the field and buys into the myth of white supremacy.

I additionally hope that my analysis of these novels demonstrates the discursive potential of bodily variance in African American literature. After juxtaposing the outcomes of Lauren and Onyesonwu my intention isn't just to make a case for the intersection of blackness and disability in storytelling and critical conversation because more writers and scholars are considering the voices of subjects who are marginalized beyond race and just how heterogeneous blackness is. But rather, I hope that the limiting fate of Onyesonwu paired with her reiteration of the maternal compassion of the Strong Black Woman proves to readers that disability shouldn't be used as a means of regurgitating old myths about black ability.

Sower and *Who Fears Death* present similarly critical commentaries about the stakes of being different in an ableist society. In both novels, those who are different fall victim to

essentialism. They are subjected to violence, dehumanization, and ostracization that's rooted in racism and sexism. Just as the protagonists are subjugated because of their differences, at the same time, their variant bodyminds also house the means for greater freedom. Onyesonwu's existence as an Ewu gives her a unique vantage point in the Seven Rivers Kingdom. She can see that the world the goddess Ani has set up where rudimentary binaries dictate the social order leaves all women, whether Nuru or Okeke, at a disadvantage. And her supernatural abilities as a sorceress give her the power to defend downtrodden women, radically re-write the blueprint of her society, and level out the gendered hierarchy by blessing women throughout the kingdom with her powers. Lauren lives with the condition of hyperempathy that is a raced disability, synonymous with drug abuse and bad black mothers. Nonetheless, the impairment that stigmatizes her as a metaphoric "crack baby" of sorts, also becomes the basis of Earthseed, her means of survival and ultimate way out of the chaos of the times.

Ultimately, the two novels differ on the demand of black female self-sacrifice at all costs. Onyesonwu shows how regressive the supercrip can be when she aligns with the Strong Black Woman. Even though the Strong Black Woman is domineering and outspoken, she is still firmly entrenched in a patriarchal hegemony. While she's completely tied to the domestic space and provides care and comfort for a male-dominated power structure, Onyesonwu is a feminist supercrip and can be understood as a Strong Black Woman who exclusively serves the needs of women. Despite possessing seemingly endless magical abilities, she is restricted to gender binaries. And in a deterministic way, Onyesonwu is destined from her inception to fight on behalf of all women, threatening male authority and usurping phallic symbols from men who abuse women. Where the Strong Black Woman is demonized for emasculating men, Onyesonwu symbolically performs the same emasculation and receives a positive reception. Because *Who*

Fears Death is an explicitly feminist text, Onyesonwu is afforded greater freedom to take on patriarchy in ways that the traditional Strong Black Woman does not. Although Onyesonwu challenges gender roles, and her mixed identity illustrates how permeable ethnic boundaries are, her characterization nonetheless regurgitates the unshakeable resiliency, inviolability, and unrealistic fearlessness of the Strong Black Woman. As a consequence, Onyesonwu becomes one-dimensional, and not only loses the complexity of humanity, but also loses her life by becoming a martyr for the advancement of others.

When it comes to critical discourse on Onyesonwu's embodiment, scholars focus all too often on ethnicity. Critics like Burnett draw too much attention to how her background as an Ewu is an act of embodied resistance against the false divide between the Nuru and the Okeke, and the authoritative voices like the Great Book, Ani, and Daib who reinforce this divide. As I discussed in this chapter, Onyesonwu's Ewu identity certainly contributes to her bodily variance, and the perception of her as a disabled subject. However, Onyesonwu's greatest act of embodied resistance is her self-sacrifice. Onyesonwu's death merits a greater discussion of how disposable black women's lives are to collective struggle, than what currently exists in the discourse on *Who Fears Death*. The Strong Black Woman always places the needs of others before her self. And in more extreme instances, she will abandon every aspect of her personhood for the benefit of others. Because Onyesonwu is a supercrip in a fantasy novel, these selfless characteristics are exaggerated to the point of self-destruction. While Onyesonwu's final act is honorable, it normalizes the idea that those fighting for greater rights, in this instance, black women, must die in order to secure equality. Before Onyesonwu dies, she was feared as a legend at best, and despised at worst. But when she dies, she replaces the esteem of Ani and becomes the mother of her own religious text and her own movement of black female supercrips. The way that

Onyesonwu's cultural currency drastically increases upon her death implies that black women can only be celebrated in death. As opposed to white male supercrips in fantasy novels who use their powers to fight injustices, and live to pursue other adventures, Onyesonwu's self-sacrifice dangerously suggests that the only way black female heroism can exist, and the only way black women's lives can be championed as meaningful is through death.

While Onyesonwu reinforces the maternalism and toxic selflessness of the Strong Black Woman, as an anti-traditionalist, Lauren explicitly rejects the figure and every other conventional type of authority from motherhood to black patriarchal leadership. With chaos becoming the new normal in an apocalyptic California, and all forms of previous stability being violently taken down by scavengers, greedy corporations, and a fascist government, Lauren rebuffs these points of authority because of their tragic inability to adequately respond to the present-day social unraveling. The Strong Black Woman for instance, is non-existent in *Sower* because she serves no purpose. The black community in *Sower* is fragmented and scattered across the country in a kind of futurist diaspora because of evictions, scavenger attacks, and natural disasters. Therefore, there is no cohesive and singular community for a black matriarch to oversee or to protect through modesty as scholars like Jenkins have theorized. Concepts like the salvific wish are irrelevant in an apocalyptic era. And through Lauren, Butler makes a compelling case for an overturning of old institutions and paradigms from the past, in favor of radically different strategies of power and principle systems.

Thus, Lauren presents the principle system, Earthseed as the solution to all the strife of the moment. Earthseed and the impairment that informs it, hyperempathy, together illustrate Quayson's aesthetic nervousness and Lauren's unique presentation as a supercrip. Quayson asserts that centering disability in a text leads to an upset in narrative devices and expectations.

In applying this concept to *Sower*, we can see that Lorde's centering Earthseed and hyperempathy leads to an upset in conventional understandings of religion and heroism. Earthseed betrays conventional expectations of religion. This principle system openly rejects the top-down approach of organized religion where a deity has absolute control and power over people. And more notably, hyperempathy promotes a notion of compulsory conscience, in which people are compelled to act ethically out of an instinctive aversion to pain rather, than an internalized sense of morality. I've discussed the positive and negative ramifications of compulsory conscience. On the one hand, compulsory conscience and hyperempathy are discomfiting because they prioritize the self in contrast to Onyesonwu's privileging of the collective in *Who Fears Death*. Compulsory conscience does away with any romanticized notion of an inherently good humanity or a society that overcomes its own troubles in order to establish a pseudo-utopia where justice exists for all subjects. Compulsory conscience instead takes a pessimistic approach and contends that society will always opt for corruption over benevolence.

On the other hand, compulsory conscience and hyperempathy complicate Lauren's characterization in ways that open up so many possibilities for what black heroines can look like. Throughout Sower, Lauren is misread at both a physical and emotional level. Characters within *Sower* misread her as masculine, and scholars like Harris tend to label Lauren a cold and even dictatorial figure. A significant amount of agency is necessary in order for Lauren to become a leader amongst her followers. And she can certainly be unlikeable at times as she envisions Earthseed as the only appropriate method of survival, and not only scoffs at marriage and motherhood, but judges other women who seek refuge in these domestic spaces. But reading Lauren as an unredeemable character with an overbearing sense of strength is a hasty surface-level reading. Rather than construct Lauren as another iteration of the bad black woman that

readers love to hate; I find that Butler avoids falling for this narrative ploy by centering disability. When we read against the grain and take into consideration Lauren's hyperempathy, we find that her apathy towards others' suffering and her seemingly callous behavior—the actions and thoughts that would lead readers to label Lauren a "black bitch"-- all stem from her impairment and her own need to survive. Hyperempathy is the bodily imperative that drives Lauren's actions and her perspective. It's important to point out that *Sower*, like all the other texts I examine in this dissertation have a disabled black woman at the center of the text. Nonetheless, when considering the first chapter on *Push* and *Sula*, Precious and Sula don't experience the liberation and full actualization that Lauren experiences. Thus, in connecting back to Quayson and further complicating their work, Lauren exists as a fully realized character not only because Butler centers *Sower* around her impairment and her disabled perspective, but Butler makes impairment, in the form of Earthseed, the solution to Lauren's problems. Centering impairment and making it the resolution to conflict doesn't just complicate literary tropes and devices, but it provides a way out of the lengthy discourse on race and gender that have left so many black female characters overdetermined.

In contrast to Onyesonwu, who bravely takes wars with her father with no qualms and fights to liberate all women in the Seven Rivers Kingdom, Lauren is a reluctant anti-hero. Hyperempathy, and the need to act out of biological necessity rather than a sense of moral righteousness, is a major reason why Lauren contradicts so many expectations for an inviolate heroine. Lauren doesn't believe in the romanticized notions of good and evil that frame world religions and the majority of supercrip narratives. As she asserts throughout *Sower*, the only evil in the world is physical pain, and people therefore engage in all kinds of actions, some morally good and others bad. But what lies at the center of people's decisions is the desire to avoid

suffering. Unlike the conventional Strong Black Woman who carries the burdens of the world on her shoulders, Lauren makes it explicitly clear that her intention with establishing her own belief system isn't a lofty, unrealistic goal to save the world or sacrifice herself for an honorable cause as Onyesonwu does. Lauren in retrospect is incredibly hyper-realistic character skirting on the edge of pessimism as she contends that the world cannot be saved, and to believe otherwise is naivete. Her only goal is to discover the truth of the human experience and the supernatural, and act as a messenger, communicating clearly through her writing and speaking the lessons she has learned to those who will listen.

Rather than present an absolute sense of resolve, the hyperempathy that Lauren embraces and the messages she preaches to her followers all tout weakness as a virtue. The embrace of weakness is a key distinction between Lauren and Onyesonwu, and it's what makes the supercrip a redemptive replacement of the Strong Black Woman. Because the Strong Black Woman denies weakness in all its forms, from emotional to disability as embodied fragility, she consequently becomes an ableist figure who limits the diversity of black women's experiences. She shoulders too much and puts everyone else's needs before her own because of this dedication to fortitude at all costs. Essentially everything toxic about this figure traces back to this refusal of weakness. Because Lauren embraces what this trope abandons, she avoids all the toxicity of the trope and breaks the mold of the Strong Black Woman. Thus, a supercrip can stand alone in a text or exist without any reference or imitation of the Strong Black Woman when they embrace their disability as an asset and a source for solutions rather than transform their differences into supra-human ability as a way of presumably compensating for their impairment.

Lauren's embrace of weakness allows her to avoid the missteps of the Strong Black Woman, and her refusal to be self-sacrificial is what allows her to keep living unlike Onyesonwu

and many other protagonists in this dissertation. In one instance, I identify her survival as a part of what makes her exceptional and a supercrip. Unlike her entire family, she possesses the tenacity and savvy to make it through an apocalyptic era. Her survival is both singular in *Sower*, yet also relatable and human to readers, in comparison to supercrips who possess larger-than-life supernatural capabilities. Furthermore, Lauren's survival illustrates the potential of the black supercrip as opposed to the Strong Black Woman, and the reality that the black supercrip can effectively replace the Strong Black Woman. Where the Strong Black Woman is bound to an unchanging past and death in all forms, from death by self-sacrifice, to death at the hands of institutional racism, the black supercrip as demonstrated by Lauren is bound to persistence. Regardless of the chaos and despondency a text is set in, this figure is dynamic and forward-thinking, and dedicated to life rather than unshaking and at times self-destructive fortitude.

Conclusion

I began this dissertation with an anecdote about the ridicule black women face for being perceived as strong. I asserted that although conventional strength is perceived as an asset, the way it can so quickly be misconstrued to mock impudent black women suggests that traditional standards of strength are really policing tools that reinforce anti-black narratives. The myth of strength not only makes black women into the proverbial butt of the joke, but I find that they face deadly consequence and gross neglect because of assumptions about invulnerability. For instance, Breonna Taylor was a twenty-six-year-old, black American emergency medical technician who police gunned down and killed on March 13, 2020 during a no-knock warrant raid. While Taylor's death was tragic, outside of some social media discourse and a steady stream of local protests in recent months, her death has failed to garner the global movement that the murder of George Floyd (another black American citizen wrongfully killed by police at the start of COVID-19 quarantines in the U.S.) has sparked.

In no way am I comparing the murders of Taylor and Floyd. Nor am I suggesting that one is more deserving of attention than the other. But the disparity in public reception of the two cases suggests a double standard where police brutality is reduced to a black men's issue. Black men become the face of targets of police brutality, and black women assume the roles of stoic caregivers in mourning and protestors, but not victims, when they are disproportionately affected by the same crisis. The way that Taylor's murder, and similar deaths of so many black women before her, have failed to garner a significant response and appropriate legal action leads me to

question why the victimization of some bodyminds yield an overwhelming public outcry, while others don't. Critics like Rebecca Wanzo have discussed how black women are frequently imperceptible in the media as victims.[32] I would qualify her claim and contend that the inability to see black women as victims has everything to do with presumptions about black female strength. The naturalized belief of black women's invulnerability ultimately plays a significant role in why black women can't tap into the privilege that comes with being visible as a victim. Taylor did not have a known disability, but I begin with her story because it's a recent example that shows the stakes of the Strong Black Woman. Black women like Taylor silently lose their lives and little to no notoriety is given. Because of the cultural belief that black women are inheritors of unparalleled stalwartness, vulnerability is not generally recognized with able-bodied women like Taylor. As I demonstrate in this dissertation, the problem of imperceptibility is made even worse with disabled black women.

The central tension I have explored throughout this dissertation is that between strength and vulnerability. I have looked at different kinds of vulnerability, from embodied frailty, like disability and death, to more abstract notions like stasis. The primary texts I have examined have all depicted consequential conflict when black women deviate from the Strong Black Woman. Some characters have been erased, shamed, discredited, and demonized because of the cultural intolerance for black female vulnerability. And others have waged a more internal struggle, trying to reconcile sickness, impairment, instability in relation to their self-perception.

The scholarship I have include similarly grapples with this tension. In unpacking black womanhood and black women's positionality within the mainstream center and the black

[32] For further discussion about black female victimhood, see Wanzo.

community, feminists have strategized ways of resisting hegemonic stereotypes internalizing and establishing agency. But in this focus on empowerment, they've often either neglected a conversation about vulnerability or discussed it rather tersely. Many of the primary texts and secondary scholarship I include suggest that vulnerability and strength can't co-exist for black woman. I assert that in order to avoid reiterating the Strong Black Woman, which many black feminists seem to agree is problematic, the focus needs to not only be on issues, stories, and strategies of empowerment, but also failure, injury, and intimacy. What we learn from these iterations of fragility can tell us just as much about how race, gender, class, ableism all collide to subjugate black women, as success stories can.

I begin Chapter One with the masterful vampire metaphor that Precious Jones crafts about the white society's perception of single black mothers like herself as proverbial welfare queens because Sapphire makes a huge focus of *Push* (1996) on deconstructing stereotypes. Both Precious, and her mother Mary appear to reinforce stereotypes of dysfunctional black families. While Sapphire has mentioned that she constructed Mary as a monstrous character to tear down the stereotype of the loving black matriarch, I find that the Strong Black Woman is the unspoken standard that justifies the mischaracterization of both Precious and Mary, and even Sula Peace from Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973) as bad black women. Because Precious, Mary, and Sula can't or refuse to labor and provide the domestic care that makes up the backbone of their own neighborhoods as the Strong Black Woman would, they are consequently read as leeches, existing at the very bottom of society's underbelly.

A key character quality that I find bonds Precious, Sula, and Eva Peace is their existence as grotesquely strong characters. I define *grotesque strength* as a physically and spiritually subversive quality that some black female characters with visible markers of difference possess.

Characters with grotesque strength possess the survivalism and independence of the Strong Black Woman but exist in a perpetually precarious situation that convention would define as abject failure. In looking at black, bodily variant women, I join black feminist theory and disability studies in discourse as my primary intervention, examining characters that both fields have overlooked in their conversations about grotesquerie. I attempt to reclaim the word grotesque as a subversive critical lens rather than a depraved state of being. After considering the provocative way grotesque characters in *Push* and *Sula* challenge the assumed value of literacy and heteronormative respectability, I still contend that grotesque theory is worth adapting as an interpretive lens because it troubles conventional understandings of normativity and deviance, and failure and success, and forces critics to consider how these widely-accepted definitions limit the potential of so many black women.

Although Sula and Precious are situated in different regions and different time periods, they are scapegoated in parallel ways by their communities. Sula exists in the Bottom as a receptacle for the townspeople's fears and overall frustration with living in a segregated, Jim Crow era town. Similarly, the gaze of the State is a dominant motif that conflates Precious with other stigmatized groups like the LGBTQ, as social burdens. Although Sula and Precious live in despondent situations and are blamed for society's problems, in the tradition of overcoming adversity that's prominent with the Strong Black Woman, Sula and Precious pursue education. Yet their pursuits yield little results, and only place their subjugation in a clearer light. The continued despondency Sula and Precious face directly challenges the longstanding perception of literacy in African American literature as a universal equalizer. But the outspoken feminist voices and communities they establish as a balm for their subjugation do little to improve their lives significantly either. Sula invokes both the grotesque and the Strong Black Woman in her

particular brand of feminism. She encourages a grotesque approach to gender, where proper roles and rules cease to exist, and only base desires drive your actions. Precious seeks refuge in grotesque feminist circles that include socially deviant women like herself. In these circles she learns to read and to love herself. However, she also comes to internalize in these spaces the toxic Strong Black Woman mantra of pushing and picking yourself up in order to overcome the odds. Although the messages Sula and Precious vocalize are empowering and intersect the grotesque with black feminism, this feminism doesn't save them from failure and death.

I ultimately found that the reason Sula and Precious had such flat character arcs in comparison to Eva, is Eva's embrace of a queered sense of disability as opposed to Sula and Precious's rejection of the qualities that make them variant. Eva flaunts her amputated leg to the point that it becomes a part of her aesthetic. Whether or not the rumors about Eva getting her leg amputated for money are true, her impairment becomes the solution to her problems as a single black mother and signifies with the historic commodification of black women's bodies. Instead of being victimized and exploited, allowing others to define her value, Eva earns a living off of a bodymind that mainstream society would see as damaged goods. Precious and Sula by contrast don't embrace the qualities that make their bodyminds variant, and they don't incorporate their differences into their identity. Precious and Sula allow outsiders to control the narrative of their bodyminds and even in the conclusion of their texts, when they are near death, they remain enamored with the able, heteronormative bodymind. Even though Sula and Precious present black feminist arguments about education and black female propriety that dovetails with the grotesque, their efforts to challenge norms and succeed are obsolete without an inclusion of disability. Eva demonstrates Jack Halberstam's notion of queered, and I would add disabled, failure as she builds and heads her own community of misfits. The flourishing business and

leadership role that Eva enjoys while still technically existing in the margins challenges how success is defined and illustrates the fully actualized potential of grotesque strength that Sula and Precious fail to secure.

In Chapter Two, I draw on theory from black feminist critics like bell hooks and Janell Hobson to illustrate the troubled history black feminists have had with vulnerability. Black feminists haven't necessarily denied the value of vulnerability, as the Strong Black Woman has. However, I find that the dearth of commentary on the subject, as opposed to an excess amount of material on empowerment, creates an unevenness in the discourse that nearly reinforces the Strong Black Woman and her emphasis on absolute agency. A reason why there has been so little discussion about vulnerability, has been a lack of consideration of disabled black women's perspectives. In and of itself, disability does away with the myths of independence and stability. Audre Lorde's *Cancer Journals* (1980) and Meri Nana-Ama Danquah's *Willow Weep for Me* (1998) are two memoirs that center disabled black women. These texts not only show us how difficult it is to manage sickness and the social expectations of ceaseless black strength regardless of health, but they show how the Strong Black Woman makes no room for diversity, thus erasing their existence.

Even though Lorde and Danquah discuss vulnerability at greater length than what we see in black feminist discourse, of the three chapters I examine, they have the most ambivalent relationship to the Strong Black Woman and disability. On the one hand, Lorde asserts that sick black women have a love-hate bond with the Strong Black Woman, where this figure invalidates their existence as inauthentic. Yet on the other hand, the resilience of the Strong Black Woman becomes the balm needed to cope with this erasure. Danquah more explicitly criticizes the Strong Black Woman, citing the figure as a primary antagonist in her battles with depression.

Yet, she also struggles with intimate disclosure to the readers, seemingly suggesting that vulnerability for black women is a slippery slope to victimhood.

The conclusions of both memoirs are equally ambiguous. At the conclusion of *Willow Weep for Me,* Danquah notes that she still battles with depression. However, she exerts some control over the disease with a nonsensical sleight-of-hand in which she acknowledges her depression as something separate from herself, even though depression is incredibly intrinsic and tied to the self. Even though Lorde eventually incorporates the loss of her breast into her identity, her relationship to the Strong Black Woman remains unclear. She criticizes the Strong Black Woman as a product created to assuage white guilt, yet invokes a sense of strength in the conclusion that is personally defined but also rooted in the militancy of the Strong Black Woman as she insists to her women readers that sickness is only valuable if its transformed into politically significant commentary. I argue that the ambivalence of Lorde's and Danquah's texts can be traced back to their precarious position as both patients seeking treatment, but also black women situated in the middle of an establishment that considers them an after-thought. This tension between needing medical care, but also seeing the extent to which the medical industry reinforces the racism and sexism of larger society, makes it incredibly difficult for a black female patient to be entirely vulnerable or to completely discard the Strong Black Woman.

While Lorde and Danquah don't fully work through all the tensions between vulnerability and strength, they still brilliantly anticipate key concepts in disability studies. Lorde anticipates the medical and social models of disability as she criticizes how much of the blame for breast cancer is placed on women as an individuated problem when environmental and structural factors like class, and geographic location play huge factors in breast cancer. By juxtaposing key moments in her journey with depression to pivotal events in the African American collective

experience, like the Rodney King trial, Danquah connects to David Eng's racial melancholia, making the groundbreaking argument that racism literally makes black people sick. I locate Lorde and Danquah in a lengthy lineage in black women's writing of discussing disability studies theory around the stakes of difference and embodiment well before the formal establishment of the field.

Where I locate a contrast between Lorde's and Danquah's work and disability studies is on the very definition of disability. The agonizing and fatal conditions that Lorde and Danquah experience completely invalidate the social model by showing that disability isn't always a construct. Some illnesses are incredibly painful and deadly and merit an urgency for cure for the sake of life rather than some dedication to ableism as disability studies conventions would dictate. Defining disability as a construct means that chronically ill black women like Lorde and Danquah are not only overlooked amongst the black community in favor of the Strong Black Woman, but they are also overlooked in disability studies in favor of healthy disabled subject. The fact that these exteriorized figures make existence for Lorde and Danquah difficult, suggests how widespread the intolerance for chronically sick black women is (to put it bluntly, that black women can't even be sick amongst those with impairment in disability studies).

Of the three chapters in this dissertation, the protagonists in the third chapter demonstrate the most explicit embrace of disability as a central part of identity and a crucial lens for viewing the world that trickles out into the supernatural. A key term I use throughout this chapter is the supercrip, and I identify Lauren Olamina in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and Onyesonwu in Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* (2010) as characters who demonstrate qualities of both the supercrip and the Strong Black Woman. I define the supercrip as a disabled subject who either in spite of or because of impairment possesses enhanced abilities that allow

them to accomplish fetes most normative subjects would be unable to do. I include scholarship from critics like Joseph Shapiro and R.J. Berger to demonstrate the extent to which disability studies rejects the supercrip for presumably reducing structural inequality to a matter of determination. I contended that the problem with the supercrip isn't the figure itself, but scholars' almost exclusive focus on white men. If critics actually look at a more diverse range of representations, they will find that observations about the figure's erasure of inequality become irrelevant. Thus, instead of dismissing the trope, I vouched for a more nuanced approach in considering how the supercrip changes from bodymind to bodymind. As evidenced by Lauren and Onyesonwu, the black supercrip's impairment is often greatly informed by a rich socio-political context.

Throughout this dissertation, I have been highly critical of the Strong Black Woman for a number of reasons, but it's important to note that I am not critical of strength itself. In fact, strength is a necessary character quality in literature, and it can be a productive theme. But a notion of strength that denies all weakness and puts subjects in the predicament of destroying themselves to live up to a standard like the Strong Black Woman is toxic strength. Thus, I found that the black supercrip is a good replacement of the Strong Black Woman, because this figure reconciles black feminists' longstanding tension over vulnerability that I reference in Chapter Two. The supercrip strikes a much-needed balance between fortitude and complicating human emotions like trepidation, insecurity, etc.

Of the two protagonists, Onyesonwu represents all the maternalism and compassion of the Strong Black Woman. I placed *Who Fears Death* in conversation with Candice Jenkins and found that even though *Who Fears Death* gives the Strong Black Woman feminist nuances, Onyesonwu still echoes the base desire of the salvific wish to self-sacrifice as a strategy for

fighting against prejudices. Because Onyesonwu imitates all the key characteristics of the Strong Black Woman to the point that she can be read as merely a disabled Strong Black Woman, I analyze her as an illustration of the dangers with the black supercrip. Onyesonwu demonstrates that when an author turns the supercrip into a stand-in for the Strong Black Woman, they reiterate the figure's tell-tale problems with overdetermination and essentialism. More importantly, Onyesonwu's self-sacrifice intimates that it isn't only black women's sole responsibility to hold a community up, but to do so, they must give their bodyminds and their lives for the greater good of the collective.

In another instance, *Sower* illustrates that in its best iteration, the supercrip contains the best parts of the Strong Black Woman, like her inventiveness and tenacity, while openly admitting her fragility. The Strong Black Woman is entirely absent from this novel because there is no cohesive black collective for her to watch over. Because the Strong Black Woman is entirely missing from the text, Lauren performs a complicated heroism. I connect *Sower* to Ato Quayson's theory, aesthetic nervousness, which argues that centering disability in a text upsets, in provocative ways, traditional storytelling devices and structures. I find that by making disability the center of the text *and* the solution to conflict, Butler complicates what would otherwise be another iteration of the bad black woman, like Sula and Precious from Chapter One. Additionally, Butler constructs a unique heroine in Lauren who embraces weakness, refuses to make lofty goals to save the world from impending doom, and possesses no miraculous abilities beyond being able to survive. Ultimately, Lauren's emphasis on survivalism further illustrates how the black supercrip is closer in approximation to human complexity than a flat caricature.

Considering the usefulness of the black supercrip in literary works outside of *Sower* brings me to the possible implications of my dissertation, and where black feminist theory and

disability studies could go from here. My project makes an intervention and even partially reconciles the tension between strength and vulnerability by offering and examining three different black character types that are less familiar than the Strong Black Woman, but more human in complexity. These character types are grotesque strength, the long-suffering black woman, and the black supercrip. Grotesque strength disrupts naturalized binaries, which is a major interpretive utility. Also, by exhibiting qualities of the Strong Black Woman in a context of failure, grotesque strength challenges the validity of the overcoming narrative and shows the faults in society's extensive expectations of black women. A major setback with grotesque strength is that its characteristic outspoken voice of critique does nothing to liberate characters or change the circumstances laid out at the beginning of the narrative. The long-suffering black woman reveals how society fetishizes black women's pain and also illustrates the inconsistent standards for socially tolerable black female anguish. A limitation of the long-suffering black woman is that her pain is never reconciled into discursive vulnerability. As her name suggests, the long-suffering woman remains in a perpetual state of agony. Lastly, the black supercrip overcomes apocalyptic situations, and performs miraculous tasks like the Strong Black Woman. However, this figure avoids reinforcing the ableism of the Strong Black Woman by centering disability as the dominant lens of the text and the ultimate solution to conflict. The danger of the black supercrip is how razor-sharp the line is between this figure and the overachieving Strong Black Woman. The supercrip very easily can become all that is toxic with the Strong Black Woman.

My hope is that scholars continue the work I have only started in this project of theorizing more nuanced portraits of black womanhood like grotesque strength and the black supercrip. The more examples of human fortitude critics can unearth and conceptualize, the more

difficult it becomes to take the Strong Black Woman seriously as a cultural mainstay. In addition to strength and fragility, I also expose tensions between normativity and deviance, as well as racial authenticity and inauthenticity. I've found that these rudimentary, either/or absolutes are the very bloodline of the Strong Black Woman. By revealing how bound up presumably opposed ideas are, discursive space opens up for a more diverse range of black womanhood and the naturalized primacy of the Strong Black Woman can be challenged. Future scholars can find meaningful use in teasing out the interconnectedness of binaries when analyzing black womanhood and embodiment.

In accordance with black disability studies efforts to recover the stories of disabled black people, it's imperative that more black feminist and black disability studies critics trace the lineage of discourse in black women's writing on disabled embodiment beyond my analysis of Audre Lorde and Meri Nana-Ama Danquah's work. Drawing out this lineage further compels the case for more intersectional work between disability studies and black feminist theory and makes for a more thorough tableau of the conversations black women have had about difference for generations. In discussing black feminist work, critics have already discussed extensively the many flaws, limitations, and stakes of the Strong Black Woman. My dissertation certainly is not singular in that regard. However, criticism of the Strong Black Woman is incomplete without a consideration of the explicit ableism of this figure. Calling out the ableism of the Strong Black Woman is so important because it lends itself to more imperative work of actively acknowledging, criticizing, and resisting ableism as an interlocking system of oppression with racism. Frankly, ableism needs to be institutionally and socially castigated with the same level of vitriol as racism, because myths of black hyper ability are just as and possibly more destructive for black citizens than associations of blackness with impairment. A final fundamental goal of

this dissertation is to make a case for a greater consideration of disability in African American literature. I intend for my analysis to compel African American literary scholars to integrate disability into analysis along with race, gender, and class. Rather than overlook disability when it surfaces in a text, a consideration of how impairment contributes to characterization and the overall shape of a text is greatly needed.

Lastly, I intend for my dissertation to inspire a greater interrogation of toxic black female strength. There is culturally an assumed value to the Strong Black Woman as an admirable trait. However, black women are frequently dehumanized, neglected, and even killed without repercussion because the conviction persists that black women are a collective bedrock that can withstand any and all trauma. Even though black rights groups have historically positioned weakness as the counterpart of black authenticity, I hope that the characters I examine in this dissertation prove that there is power, agency and strength in fragility.

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