

# ***WORK IN THE INTERSECTIONS:***

## ***A Black Feminist Disability Framework***

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*A Black feminist disability framework allows for methodological considerations of the intersectional nature of oppression. our work in this article is twofold: to acknowledge the need to consider disability in Black Studies and race in Disability Studies, and to forward an intersectional framework that considers race, gender, and disability to address the gaps in both Black Studies and Disability Studies. By employing a Black feminist disability framework, scholars of African American and Black Studies, Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, and Disability Studies have a flexible and useful methodology through which to consider the historical, social, cultural, political, and economic reverberations of disability.*

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A Black feminist disability framework has the potential to offer new theoretical paradigms that lead to a more complex and nuanced understanding of our lives. This framework highlights how and why Disability Studies must adopt a comprehensively intersectional approach to disability and non-normative bodies and minds and explains why Black Studies should do the same. With such a model, scholars might reconceptualize what conditions make for a “good” life, particularly as it relates to how we work and how we use language. Drawing on historical and theoretical examples from the fields of Black Studies and Disability Studies, we argue for an enhanced and committed critical engagement with Black feminist theory, particularly at the intersections of race, gender, and disability. To facilitate the intersectional analysis we call for, our literature review *cum* discussion is divided into two sections that, first, examines the omission of disability in Black Studies and race within Disability Studies, and second, discusses Black feminist theory as a useful intervention that leads to a framework for use in these disciplines and beyond.

A Black feminist disability framework centers race, gender, and disability, challenging these generally siloed theories to work together to better understand the realities for those multiply marginalized within society. Adopting a Black feminist disability framework gives us the scaffolding to think in generative ways about the intersectional nature of oppression, thus reinvigorating our theorizing so as to address the multiplicity of our lives. In the section titled Disability in Black Studies and Blackness in Disability Studies, we examine how Black Studies should more explicitly engage disability theory and how Disability Studies can benefit from interventions from Black Studies. Our section Black Feminist Disability Framework in Practice is devoted to the application of a Black feminist disability framework towards more careful analysis of the language we use and the ways we work. We conclude by offering readers new sites of study that a Black feminist disability framework is uniquely poised to address.

## BLACK FEMINIST METHODOLOGY

Black Studies has been notoriously slow to incorporate gender into its central analytic framework; similarly, the neglect of gender in Disability Studies elicited Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's intervention, and the creation of Feminist Disability Studies (Garland-Thomson 2002). Feminist Disability Studies has been an important touchstone in our thinking about the implications of race, class, gender, and sexuality—arenas that Black feminist intersectional theorizing brings to the fore. Like the Combahee River Collective and the authors of *all the Women are White, all the Blacks are Men, but Some of Us are Brave*, Black feminist scholars have been working within intersectional frameworks for generations, a practice that evolved even before Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term (Combahee River Collective 1982; Hull, Scott, and Smith 1993; Crenshaw 1991). As Black feminist Audre Lorde astutely put it, "There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives" (1984, 138). By pushing for a Black feminist disability framework, we work to transform these disciplines such that they see the integration of questions of race, gender, disability, and other vectors of power as essential for their deployment.

Only a year separates the publication of Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1991) article "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," and the signing of the American with Disabilities Act (ADA) (1990). Both Crenshaw's articulation of intersectionality and the signing of ADA serve as pivotal interventions that illuminate the oppressive structures that impact women of color and disabled people, respectively. Crenshaw noted the interplay between race and gender in violence against Black women; we take up intersectionality to argue that a single-issue approach to disability fosters the same pitfalls. Our intervention requires intersectionality to explicitly attend to disability. It is our contention that racism, sexism, and ableism share a eugenic impulse that needs to be uncovered and felled.

By using historical and theoretical examples from Black Studies and Disability Studies, we show that a Black feminist disability framework is emergent and intersectional. These examples, when analyzed with such a framework in mind, are rich with unexplored connections across both disciplines. Embedded within the narratives of some of the central figures and theories of these fields are the ingredients for creating the unifying framework. For example, the excess strength and otherwise "too much-ness" of Blackness is an oft-deconstructed trope in Black Studies. The myth of the *strong Black woman* has been critiqued in many ways, notably by a powerful range of Black feminist scholars but has rarely been examined as a form of ableism—internalized or social (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2009; Cole and Guy-Sheftall 2009; Collins 2000, 2005; Giddings 2007; Harris-Perry 2011; Mataka 2000). The myth suggests that Black women are uniquely strong, able to endure pain, and surmount otherwise difficult obstacles because of their innate tenacity. Black women are disallowed disability and their survival is depoliticized. Survival is a form of resistance and a source of celebration, particularly in the face of the reality that, as Lucille Clifton said, "Every day something has tried to kill me and has failed" (Clifton 1993, 25). There is a productive tension in recognizing the critical connections of the celebration of survival in the context of the demands made on Black bodies to transcend all suffering (Derricotte 2010). Resilience is praised while trauma, violence, and pain are too common to actually be interrogated for very long. The logic of Black hyper-visibility produces subjects that are barred from weakness—and disability in Western thought as figured through non-normative bodies is the ultimate sign of unsuitability.

To counteract such notions of unsuitability, a form of strategic essentialism has been adopted that upholds internalized ableism and ultimately disallows Black suffering through embracing an identification with this presumed hyper-ability. How many of us grew up with parents who warned us of having to be twice as good as our white counterparts? Designed to fortify Black children against the profound racism that is masked in a masquerade of meritocracy, this notion of having to be “twice as good,” while often true, also marks the difficulties with discussing trauma, health disparities, and psychiatric or physical disabilities within Black communities. If one is not able to work twice as hard to keep up with the masquerade, then what value does one have to the project of Black redemption? The cultural tradition from which this adage stems has been supported by studies and corroborated with empirical evidence. Black people are more likely to be surveilled, punished, and passed over for promotion than their white counterparts in all societal institutions. Black workers must demonstrate a significantly higher level of skill than their white counterparts in order to keep their jobs despite receiving lower wages and fewer opportunities for promotion (White 2015). Black people cannot afford to be disabled when they are required to be phantasmically abled in a white supremacist society. By bringing disability studies and a Black feminist theoretical lens to address this myth, scholars are better able to explain Black people’s reluctance to identify as disabled and potentially offer new strategies for dismantling ableism within Black Studies.

Black feminist texts can provide a methodological map for the integration of disability, race, and gender, even when disability is not named as such. In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs ([1861] 1987) detailed how her confinement in an attic room as she attempted to steal herself away from slavery caused her pain and impaired her body long after she gained her freedom. She implied that she traded her abled body for bodily freedom, a tactic utilized and observed in other accounts from the enslaved. Over a hundred years later, Audre Lorde did not frame her battle with cancer or the fact that she was legally blind in identarian terms, though her work in the *Cancer Journals* and other essays is profoundly shaped by her experiences with both. In discussing her desire to write the *Cancer Journals*, Lorde lamented that she had no writing to turn to that described the experiences of a Black lesbian woman surviving cancer. These are but two examples of Black feminism engaging race and disability in all but name, prior to the development of both Black Studies and Disability Studies as scholarly fields.

Our primary methods of analysis for this article involved reviewing and mining concepts and narratives from Black Studies and Disability Studies, such as the trope of the strong Black woman or Lorde’s *Cancer Journals*, for the ways in which disability and race go underexamined. Throughout each section, we use Black feminism’s clarion call for intersectional analysis to stitch the fields together. By using a Black feminists disability framework, a paradigm shift in Black Studies and Disability Studies becomes possible.

## **DISABILITY IN BLACK STUDIES AND BLACKNESS IN DISABILITY STUDIES**

### **All the Blacks Are Able-Bodied**

Scholars of Blackness have continually noted the powerful repercussions of stigmatized embodiment on the everyday lives and material realities of Black people. At the same time, Black Studies scholars have approached embodiment with varying levels of attention to gender. Ida B.

Wells eloquently elucidated the connection between white fear, false accusations, and state-sanctioned violence in lynching cases of mostly Black men (Wells- Barnett 1996). W.E.B. Dubois's oft quoted and canonical assertion of "double consciousness" itself suggests the complex psychological defenses that Black people have developed in response to being targets of bodily and mental violence (Du Bois 1909). More contemporarily, we might consider Melissa Harris Perry's framing of "the crooked room," which dictates the inherently racist and sexist standards by which many Black women are not only judged but also encouraged to orient a sense of value and self around (2011, 1). Henry Louis Gates (1989) wrote about the role of physical dominance—and by extension disability—in African American literature, from Frederick Douglass's recounting of Aunt Hester's brutal beating, to Harriet Tubman's negotiation of her epileptic seizures. In all of these instances, the body and disability are hailed, if not explicitly named.

Yet, it is perhaps precisely because of Black Studies' deep familiarity with stigmatized embodiment that scholars in these fields have not more substantively taken up disability as core to their work, or more comprehensively engaged Disability Studies. In addition, Disability Studies is a field that we acknowledge is fraught with omissions, as it often ignores race as an analytic category. But whether it is lynching cases, Aunt Hester's beating, or Tubman's navigation of her seizures, Black Studies often prioritizes race over disability (and gender) as interlocutors pertinent to the analysis.

Blackness has not only been stigmatized but has also been used to elect candidates for death and destruction. As Nirmala Erevelles (2014) notes in *Crippin' Jim Crow*, race and disability have been used in tandem to incarcerate Black people for decades. The additional perceived stigma of disability is an added threat to an always already perilous identity group (Goffman 2009; Link and Phelan 2001; Scambler 2004). Race—and specifically Blackness—has been used to mark disability, while disability has inherently "Blackened" those perceived as unfit. Black people were—and continue to be—assumed intellectually disabled precisely because of race.

Black bodies were assumed to be suited only for work, and not for freedom. From Thomas Jefferson's assertion that Blackness inherently barred one from full cognitive citizenship, to the blossoming of eugenics in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that linked race and ability through scientifically racist theories that denigrated Black intelligence, Blackness has been consistently linked with lack and subhuman status. In her exhaustively researched work, *Neither Fugitive, Nor Free: Atlantic Slavery, Freedom Suits, and the legal Culture of travel*, Edlie L. Wong (2009) points out that in the U.S. courtroom, Black people were framed through "Black legal disabilities," that barred people of African descent from full citizenship. Race marks Black people as being inherently disabled, fundamentally other. In this way, race and disability are mutually constitutive.

In a western frame, Blackness is the antithesis of whiteness, the necessary other that creates the dichotomized racial caste system. Similarly, disabled and able-bodied function as two oppositional poles that belie the slippages and realities in between. Black people are afforded the curious task of being simultaneously hyper-able-bodied and disabled, while at the same time being locked into ideologies that figure us as both superhumanly strong and pathologically inept. This paradox persists, locking Black men into narratives of superhuman athletic ability and lowered academic expectations, and embroiling Black women into stereotypes of indefatigability and sexual

delinquency (Axelsen 1985; Davis 2003). Black boys find themselves disproportionately shuttered in special education classrooms while simultaneously encouraged to excel at physically demanding activities like sports. Conversely, Black girls are often reprimanded for not comporting themselves like their white girl classmates, becoming frequent recipients of in-school suspensions and other disciplinary punishments for failing to meet standards of white femininity (Ladson Billings 2011). Black girl bodies are surveilled and judged “too developed,” making them responsible for any sexual violence they experience (Bailey 2016). These modern effects of centuries- old stereotypes demand the more political scholarship that Black feminism provides.

By the mid-nineteenth century, under the regime of American chattel slavery, Black people’s desire for freedom was pathologized through a plethora of laws, practices, and social stipulations—all of which were designed to frame Blackness as inherently inferior. In fact, as part of the propaganda supporting American chattel slavery, the notion that Black people were naturally intended to be slaves became a mainstay of the pro- slavery argument. Part of that pro-slavery dogma introduced the idea of drapetomania—making the Black desire for freedom a psychologically aberrant mental illness. In *Medical apartheid*, Harriet Washington (2006) outlined the various ways in which Black desires for freedom were curtailed—either through medical diagnosis (in the case of drapetomania) or via physical domination—intentionally disabling enslaved people (through amputation, physical marking, or limb restriction) to prevent escape, assert dominance, and exert bodily control (36). The specter of disability permeates the Black scholarship of enslavement and other studies of the Black experience.

Much of the Black experience is shaped by an understanding of Black bodies as a productive labor force, leaving little room for an identity- based approach to disability. Figurations of Blackness as hyper able and yet fundamentally “crippled” by race have been used to produce Black people as ineligible or unsound for citizenship. historically, Black people have been valued for their utility, particularly in a former slave economy. For this reason, the stakes for identifying as disabled, or acknowledging a compromised relationship to labor and the ability to generate capital, is often not a viable option for most Black people. Stigma further complicates acknowledging disability, as it places an already precarious self at further risk of marginalization and vulnerability to state and medical violence, incarceration, and economic exploitation.

Ableism and notions of disability are a major component of anti-Black racism. Stereotypes about Black women’s hypersexual natures were used to justify sexual violence against Black women (Collins 2005). The idea that Black people are not as smart as white people, and beliefs that Black people are closer to animals, all incorporate ableist and white supremacist ideas about Black bodies that help rationalize Black social subservience. Black club women and activists in the early twentieth century often confronted stereotypes that marshalled raced, gendered, and ableist concepts of Black people and Black women specifically. Their utilization of respectability politics to refute these stereotypes were an attempt to reframe Black representation in society (Higginbotham 1992). This impulse to maintain and mimic the power structures’ ideas about appropriate white societal behavior lingers even today in Black Studies liberatory imaginations and in popular culture as well.

One of the longstanding critiques of Black Studies is the deeply embedded patriarchy of the field and its ideas about liberation (Christian 1989). A vision of Black men no longer emasculated and

heads of the household with wives and obedient children dominates many of these liberatory fantasies. Even cosmologies that attempt to embrace a less Eurocentric model of success and partnering still often evoke a patriarchal familial dynamic where women are subordinate. What of disabled Black men who cannot work? Are they failed men because they do not meet the able-bodied expectations of liberation? Are they less masculine if they are queer or are they queered by not having a valorized form of masculinity? Care is feminized and thus devalued in our culture, and this ideology is still embedded in some liberatory futures that are imagined in Black Studies.

A Black feminist disability framework helps shift this paradigm. Able-bodiedness and having a job are masculinized; even as Black Studies critiques whiteness it still reinforces ideas about being a respectable Black person with an able-bodied heterosexual nuclear family. The critical artistic work that Leroy Moore is doing to challenge our ideas around Black masculinity should be more fully embraced by both Disability Studies and Black Studies (Moore 2017). We must recalibrate our expectations such that Black people are valuable beyond their ability to be productive to the State.

When we discuss the vital importance of Black lives mattering in this contemporary moment, as Disability Studies scholar Akemi Nishida asks, do we also mean the lives of Black disabled people (Dunham et al. 2015)? Can we be as fervent in our desire for justice for Mario Woods, Jeremy McDole, or Kevin Mathews as we are for Tamir Rice or Michael Brown (Matier and Ross 2016; *Delawareonline* 2016; Good 2016)? Do we imagine that those who live with disabilities live less valuable lives—and if so, how does that seep into our work? Are we prepared to reach toward a radical liberatory corporeal politics that imagines and makes space for truly free Black bodies of all abilities?

### **When All the Disabled Are White**

As the 1960s and 1970s mobilized marginalized groups around the structural nature of their oppressions, so too were disabled people beginning to think through their experiences in society as connected to a stigmatized social identity. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 would serve as a model for the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (Garland-Thomson and Bailey 2010). Similarly, the formation of Black Studies and Women's Studies departments sowed the seeds for Disability Studies to be recognized as a field in its own right.

When we analyze the discourse of the popularized history of disability rights, we see white men with class privilege upset about the ways they have been excluded from mainstream society and their birth right. The work of disabled people of color in the movement is often obscured (Schweik 2011). Part of the activism of white, privileged men is premised on not being able to access the full power of their whiteness and masculinity. The 2005 documentary *Murderball* addressed this point by profiling mostly white men who play wheelchair rugby, otherwise known as “murderball” due to the violent nature of the sport (Rubin and Shapiro 2005). The white men participants talked about how the sport gave them access to a masculinity they were often denied because they were not able-bodied. But one wonders what the perception would have been of predominantly Black men playing a game called “murderball”? The racial implications of white masculinity go uninterrogated both in the film and also in scholarship about the film.

Race never leaves us in this country; it is an ever-present ghoul—a spectral, demonic force. We invoke the notion of ghouls to drive home the destructive, haunting, and powerful nature of white supremacy. From colonization to enslavement to lynching, racism as an ideology has served as an all-encompassing embodiment on which U.S. society is built. Disability, like race, is with us always. The tropes utilized to distinguish between supposedly superior white bodies and purportedly inferior bodies of color have relied on corporeal assessments that take the able white male body as the center and “norm.” Notions of disability inform how theories of race were formed, and theories of racial embodiment and inferiority (racism) formed the ways in which we conceptualize disability.

A Black feminist disability framework dislodges the white male body as the central normative body in Disability Studies, establishing the need to examine how bodies are raced and the ways in which this intersects with disability, disease, and bodily sovereignty. By moving racially and gender marginalized people to the center of Disability Studies, new considerations of existing theoretical perspectives are required. Close discursive readings of Disability Studies theories reveal an important need for conversations that are grounded in race, gender, and class simultaneously.

A significant feature of Disability Studies theorizing is the articulation of the social and medical models of disability. The medical model of disability treats impairment as an individual issue that must be medically addressed. Something has gone *wrong* when impairment occurs, and there needs to be individualized medical care to restore the person to proper *health* through corrective surgeries, prostheses, and other forms of intervention. The social model, however, suggests that it is actually the way our society is set up that creates disability and inaccessibility. For example, the use of stairs in architecture to access buildings is a social choice and could be easily replaced with ramps were it not for the social pressure to maintain systems that benefit able bodies. To paraphrase an example from attorney and disability activist Stella Young, no amount of staring at a flight of steps made those steps wheelchair accessible (“Practicing Pride in the Face of Exclusion” 2014). Similarly, scholars of race have focused on the ways in which society treats and refuses to grant access to marginalized people of color. Disability, like our ideas about race and gender, are socially constructed. However, the fact that race, gender, and disability are socially constructed does not mean they are not real.

While the critique of the medical model of disability is not only warranted but critical, it is also important to remember that, for some, talking about having access to the healing therapies offered by the medical field is part of addressing the medical field’s long disinvestment in Black health. Disability Studies’ critiques of the medical field manage to understate or entirely ignore the historically exploitative relationship between Black communities and the medical field. Disability Studies has consistently produced a critique of the medical model of disability that obfuscates the particular vulnerability of Black, women, and gender-nonconforming bodies. While certainly the medical model is a problematic trope, it may signal differently to communities that have tried for many decades to receive the most elementary care only to be refused. As uncomfortable as it may make those of us engaged in the Disability Studies field, some communities are actually yearning for not only care but treatment and cure. Part of corporeal autonomy as a theoretical stance—one that links both Blackness and disability—is that it allows for people to choose what is best for their bodies: treatment, cure, or a resistance to medical intervention altogether.

Lastly, the medical model may be one of the few places where the traumatic injury and stress of quotidian racism is quantitatively catalogued: an intellectual location where we witness how the grinding injustices of racism, sexism, misogynoir, homophobia, transphobia, classism—and yes, ableism—impact Black lives (Bailey 2016). Black people have a vexed, tenuous, and painful relationship with medicine. Disability studies should consider how to pose nuanced, sophisticated and culturally responsive frameworks within which to consider the racialized poetics of the medical model of disability.

Disability justice scholars and activists—largely queer and trans people of color—have pushed back on the understandings of the social model of disability as well (Berne 2015; Mingus 2011). They, too, question social structure but point out the internalized ableism of expecting everyone to participate in society in the same way (Watts and Erevelles 2004). As opposed to demanding disabled representation and access to mainstream arenas of power, they take the approach of also valuing crip spaces. They question the speed at which we expect our world to function. These activists and scholars recognize that equity for queer, trans, and Black people also has been overwhelmingly about access to adequate medical care. These activists demand adherence to a social model of disability that requires a complex and nuanced engagement with the medical needs and realities of some populations.

Though Disability Studies has disposed of the social model because it simplifies a complex relationship between people's impairments and disabilities, it is nonetheless useful for our purposes as we interrogate Black people's reluctance to identify as disabled. The language of "impairment" and "disability" helps us distinguish between dominant identifications, as opposed to facets of bodily realities that impact how Black people may be understanding their experiences of bodily difference.

Disability Studies shares a strong critique of eugenic medicine with Black Studies. A range of scholars have recently addressed (and problematized) the difficult relationship between medicine and race, and the social versus medical model of disability. In her piece, "My Most humiliating Jim Crow Experience: Afro-Modernist Critiques of Eugenics and Medical Segregation," Jess Waggoner (2016) confronts the impact of racial segregation on medical treatment that gives rise to medical justice. The recent work of Leroy Moore (2017), The Harriet Tubman Collective (2016), Owens, Cooper, and Buttes (2008), and Rana A. Hogarth (2017) all call for close examinations of how Blackness is taken up and exploited by the field of medicine. The work of Harriet Washington (2006) and Dorothy Roberts (1997) addresses the misogynoiristic eugenic legacies of our medical systems without being fully understood or addressed as Disability Studies scholarship. The late Chris Bell, himself formerly a president of the Society of Disability Studies, did much in his own work to forge the connections between Black Studies and Disability Studies. his groundbreaking collection, *Blackness and Disability* (Bell 2011), brought together Black scholars explicitly doing work at these intersections. While many disability scholars pay homage to Bell, their citations of his work have not led to the fundamental shift that he desired Disability Studies to make. Recent scholarship has initiated exciting conversations and assemblages between Disability Studies and Black Studies. Sami Schalk's book *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction* (2018) drives home the connection between race, gender, and disability. Schalk's scholarship is joined by the work of a cadre of emerging scholars who ground their work in Black feminist methodologies, including Angel Miles



and Michelle Jarman (Miles, Nishida, and Forber-Pratt 2017). Therí A. Pickens was the editor of a special issue of the *African American Review* (2017), the first entire issue focused on disability and only the second time that a scholar has endeavored to bring together a broad array of those working at the inter- section of Black Studies and disability.

## **BLACK FEMINIST DISABILITY FRAMEWORK IN PRACTICE**

Issues of rhetoric and language as they relate to Black vernacular and disability are another site of interrogation for a Black feminist disability framework. Black people are often singled out and critiqued for the use of ableist language. A national firestorm erupted when the musical group Black Eyed Peas released a song initially titled, “Let’s Get Retarded.” The ableist anthem was quickly swatted down and the lyrics and title were changed to, “Let’s Get It Started” (Bailey 2011). This swift correction was a missed opportunity to discuss why the word shouldn’t be used, beyond the hurt it causes certain communities. What often is missing from conversations that attempt to address problematic language are the origins and impact of those words in creating and maintaining a climate of ableism. It is not enough to get people to stop saying certain words if the underlying ableism remains unchallenged.

Furthermore, like the “n-word,” Black cultural production is often rearranging the original meaning and use of words for specific anti-racist purposes. Black feminists discuss the nuances of “bitch” as a multivalent word that can signal misogynoir or familiarity, depending on context and speaker. Nowhere is this conversation more fraught than with the use of the word “crazy.” Disability scholars and advocates have lamented the ubiquity of the term in modern speech, identifying crazy as a term that further stigmatizes people with psychiatric disabilities. Across cultures and generations, people use the word to mean many things, the least of which is a person with an actual psychiatric disability. For many Black people, the phrase “white people are crazy” is a common exclamation that expresses the incredulity of racist and other seemingly unexplainable behavior by white people. Given the violent unprovoked racism that whites enact towards Blacks, the adage seems not far from true. The unreasonableness of racism further complicates the murkiness of whether crazy is an apt description for white racist behavior. And what of the mental anguish of racism? In Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), Sethe, the protagonist, is forced to make an impossible choice because of the racist violence she has endured. This act haunts her life, eventually making her go “crazy.” Is there a way to reclaim crazy, or at least acknowledge the ways that anti-Black racism is *crazy-making* for both white and Black people alike? Madness studies—and Black scholars within that field like La Marr Bruce (2012, 2017)—ask us to consider the implications of Black madness in racist systems.

Crazy has also been weaponized against Black women in ways that Black feminists are beginning to unpack. In a March 30, 2015, webinar about state violence against Black women and girls, speaker Barbara Arnwine talked about the police killings of Tanisha Anderson and Michelle Cusseaux, both Black women in the midst of mental health episodes that were used to justify their deaths. Arnwine aligned the “crazy Black woman” trope with the “rebellious black b[itch]” myth from slavery, showing the slippery nature of racism and its continued impact on our lives (#herDreamDeferred 2015). The conversation did not, however, illuminate the ways that Black people with psychiatric or physical disabilities are disproportionately harmed by police violence (Perry 2017).

With a Black feminist disability framework, we can think critically about the way that crazy is deployed for mass murderers, and their white-ness and maleness often goes unacknowledged. We can begin to actualize theoretical interventions that challenge mainstream news narratives that erase race and gender and forestall the ableism used to explain away white violence. It is through praxis that we can start to create a new scholarship that is informed not just by our critical inquiries but also by our resulting actions and processes that shift previous paradigms of understanding.

Disability rights activists frequently cite that disabled people are the largest minority group in the United States. This statistic is used to substantiate calls for disabled unity and collective action. However, this statement misses the very nuances within the largest minority that prevent the types of collective action that is envisioned. How does one compare the drunk-driving-induced paralysis of a white high school quarterback to the job-acquired carpal tunnel of immigrant women assembly line workers? Or the intentional lead poisoning of the Black children in Flint, Michigan, with congenital disabilities that are the result of chance? The age of onset of these disabilities, the manner in which they were acquired, along with gender, class, and race all shape the way that people are treated, interpellated, have access to resources, or move through society.

In their study, Amani M. Nuru-Jeter, Roland H. Thorpe Jr., and Esme Fuller-Thomson (2011) noted that “Black people experienced higher odds of disability across the adult lifespan compared with white people” (834). Their study examined disability across the life span of Black people and found stark disparities between white and Black people regarding disability. They noted that despite the higher prevalence of disability within Black and other communities of color, the disability rights movement and Disability Studies remain white in leadership and in stated objectives and outcomes.

The racial and gender disparities do not end there. Women provide most of the care for disabled people globally. More specifically, women of color disproportionately care for disabled people (Family Caregiver Alliance 2016). Black Studies and Disability Studies need to consider that Black women and other women of color do most of the labor in the service of disability despite the impact on their ability to care for themselves or their families. Caregivers are often engaged in debilitating work for disabled people and become disabled themselves (Moore 2015). The Family Caregiver Alliance notes that 40 to 70 percent of caregivers have symptoms of clinical depression, and caregivers also report worsening physical health as a result of the demands of caregiving on the body (Family Caregiver Alliance 2016). A Black feminist disability framework would ensure that race, age of onset, method of acquirement, gender, sexuality, and other important aspects of the way disability is multiply inflected are brought to bear in our analysis.

According to a 2014 U.S. Department of Labor study, Black people are more likely to be disabled than whites, Latinxs, and Asian Americans. Black people have worked and continue to work debilitating jobs (U.S. Department of Labor 2015). The United States Social Security Administration (SSA) found that “Black workers in every age group shown are more likely to die or become eligible for Social Security disability benefits” (2000, 1). Moreover, because social security benefits are often based on previous wage labor, Black people—and Black women specifically—drawing social security are drawing from a lower overall rate of pay than their white predecessors, thus impacting how much support they are eligible for from the SSA (Parekh 2008). In an article for *Business Insider*, author Laura Friedman reported that while the average life

expectancy in the United States is 79 years there is at least a four-year gap between the life expectancy for Black and white Americans (2014). The median age of death for Black men in the District of Columbia is 66 years. The Centers for Disease Control—steeped in the medical model— lists 15 major categories under which Black men succumb, including work conditions, heart disease, diabetes, police violence, homicide, and perinatal conditions that are more likely to go untreated. White men with at least 16 years of education live a full 14 years longer than Black men— on average (CDC 2015).

Despite the reluctance of some Black scholars to engage Disability Studies, Black Studies research has much to teach the field of Disability Studies. Black people, particularly Black women, are more likely to care for disabled relatives and keep them connected to their communities. Black and other people of color have higher rates of disability than their white counterparts. Black Studies research suggests that Black people are employing a different model, one of collectivity and potential interdependence that eschews the individualist model of a disability rights frame- work. Black Studies and Disability Studies scholars could call for strategies that not only facilitate the independence of disabled people to do what able-bodied people do and go where able-bodied people go, but also critique the assumption that independence is inherently valuable given the demographics of caregivers and those cared for. Black feminism becomes an essential interlocutor for these questions.

Disability Studies questions how jobs are structured, the impossibility of a five-day work week for everyone, and the demand that everyone work. Not only are some jobs debilitating, some people are unable to work. how might we reimagine our labor organizing if we do not assume that everyone should work to get their needs met? how might we restructure society itself if we could meet our needs without working jobs, how- ever dignified and humane they might become?

A Black feminist disability framework reconceptualizes our ideas about work and labor. While Black Studies has successfully critiqued U.S. labor practices, it has not gone so far as to critique *work* itself. “Jobs with dignity” still assumes that people are able to work a job and that the structure of the 9-to-5 workday makes sense. The racist discrimination against people with Black sounding names is now well documented, and while we need strategies to address prejudicial hiring practices we must also question the conditions under which we are expected to work. All too often people ask what is a respectable job, rather than offering a critique of a service economy or the globalizing socioeconomic system that demands more and more labor for less and less pay. A critique of wages has yet to fully take on the fact that Black women make less than Black men and white women, in addition to performing the second shift at home (Patten 2016). A Black feminist disability framework demands a recalibration of labor expectations for those who are also primary caretakers.

## CONCLUSION

We want scholarship that can inform better direct services and actions for those living daily with and through social death (Sexton 2011). When the material body is centered, how do our theoretical arguments and subsequent activism and organizing need to change? We can begin to delve more deeply into the theories of state violence and bodily control and sovereignty that scholars like Harriet Jacobs point us toward in her writing (Stewart 2015). The theoretical

interventions of Afro- pessimism and Black nihilism have much to say about Black death but do not connect these conversations overtly to disability. The incorporation of disability into these theoretical projects might help us think through the ways in which we imagine a Black life that is more than just survival and more than able-bodied utopia. What does liberation look like if disabled Black bodies are allowed in our futures? Would we be better able to hold Disability Studies accountable for its erasure of raced and gendered bodies?

Additionally, we might reclaim critically important Black figures in history who were otherwise erased from the archive because of their race, disability, or because they inhabit the intersection of both race and disability. This is not a project of posthumously assigning people a label that they wouldn't have chosen for themselves but looking critically at the context of a life and thinking through disability as an equally powerful force in shaping a person. By reassessing our heroes of the past with the lens of disability, we can provide more texture and more humanity to our portrayal of our ancestors. Whether it is the painful epileptic seizures of Harriet Tubman that helped her stay ahead of bounty hunters or the Mississippi appendectomy that spurred Fannie Lou Hamer's activism, the intersections of disability and race in the bodily praxis of historical Black figures needs to be more deeply addressed.

Disabled Black women experience "intersecting patterns of racism and sexism. . . . Because of their intersectional identity as both women and of color within discourses that are shaped to respond to one or the other, women of color are marginalized within both" (Crenshaw 1991). As we have shown, Disability Studies often neglects racism and sexism's impact on disability, just as Black Studies can omit the realities of ableism and sexism's impact on race. Rather than reformulate Crenshaw's model, we build on the intersectional work of scholars in both fields to suggest that disability, race, and gender are always already present and simply need to be attended to in our analysis.

To have a conversation and far more generative theoretical projects that ultimately serve the goal of our collective liberation, this article moves unnecessarily disparate theoretical spaces toward each other, in order. If Black Studies took up disability and gender more comprehensively and productively confronted ableism, we might discard ableist language and create new language. Too often we use metaphors that subtly undermine our liberatory agendas, but we also have the power to transform ableist invective in equally liberatory ways. If Disability Studies took up Black Studies and critical race theory in ways that displaced the white disabled body as the norm, we might gain a stronger, more flexible, and globally relevant framework from which to critique late neoliberal capitalism. Too often we engage race and its impact as an additive or comparative category of difference rather than a constitutive aspect of notions of disability in the West. When disability is more seriously regarded within Black Studies, race within Disability Studies, and gender in both, there are an infinite number of revolutions that a Black feminist disability framework can help bring about.

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