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

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

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

Inspiration porn and supercrip narratives are similar in several ways. Both concepts rely on certain affective registers, such as inspiration, awe, tragedy, triumph, and pity; they also presume a non-disabled audience and engage ableist concepts, such as overcoming or compensating for the perceived obstacle caused by disability. They are also both narrative

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

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

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

frameworks.[4] That is, the people represented in these images and stories are not themselves supercrips nor inspiration porn, but rather supercrip and inspiration porn frameworks are applied to represent people and their stories in this way. There are a few differences between inspiration porn and supercrip narratives, however. The main difference is that inspiration porn often includes representations of non-disabled people "helping" disabled people, an approach not typically considered part of supercrip narratives. Inspiration porn is also used primarily in reference to memes, photos, videos, and news stories that are shared on the internet, whereas the term supercrip has most often been applied to news stories and fictional representations.

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

A major exception to this trend is a blog post titled, "White Privilege & Inspiration Porn," by activist Vilissa Thompson, in which she responds to white disabled critiques of the story of Anaya Ellick, a Black disabled girl who won a penmanship contest, as inspiration porn. Thompson argues that, although she too is critical of inspiration porn, sometimes she does share stories on social media that have an inspirational bent to them. As a Black disabled woman, Thompson asserts that she does "not have the 'luxury' of picking and choosing stories that depict us [Black disabled people] in a positive, non-inspirational light...each time we read about a Black disabled person and it is not about us being victimized, traumatized, or killed, we hold tight to those stories because we see a part of ourselves."[7] Thompson's post provides insight into how the race and (dis)ability identities of the individuals in a representation, as well as those of the audience, can impact the reception of potential inspiration porn.[8] Her arguments also provide a starting point for my own: that inspiration

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[4] Beth Haller and Jeffrey Preston "Confirming Normalcy: 'Inspiration Porn' and the Construction of the Disabled Subject?"; Sami Schalk "Reevaluating the Supercrip."

[5] Russel Meeuf 110-111; Schalk "Reevaluating the Supercrip" 80-81.

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

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

[8] I use (dis)ability "to reference the overarching social system of bodily and mental norms that includes ability and disability" and disability when referring to the specific identity, category or experience within the social system of

porn, as it is currently understood in activist and academic circles alike, is primarily a "White Disability Studies" concept that ultimately operates differently within Black and other racialized experiences and representations of disability.[9]

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

In order to support these arguments, I use the viral story of Michael Mack, Jr.'s *Black Panther* prosthetic leg as a case study for examining the impact of race on so-called inspirational representations of disability. To do so, I first provide a timeline overview of how the *Black Panther* prosthetic video and story circulated during the summer of 2018 in two relatively distinct, racialized waves. Subsequently, I undertake a comparative analysis of the two waves of media coverage. I demonstrate that while the first wave of coverage from Black digital media outlets focused almost exclusively on Mack's "Black boy joy" and the power of representation for Black people, the second wave of coverage from mainstream, white, local news outlets conformed more to the norms of inspiration porn by focusing on Mack's disability and representing him as the exceptional, yet passive recipient of non-disabled charity. Although almost all of the media coverage of this story drew on similar positive affective registers like inspiration and joy, the emphases and frameworks vary, predominantly along racial lines. The racial differences in framing this viral video provide insight into how concepts within Disability Studies, like inspiration porn, which have been primarily developed and deployed in regard to white experiences and representations of disability, may need to be adjusted or discarded in the context of racialized subjects to account for the specificity of cultural norms and racial histories.

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

The concept of *going viral* is a relatively new one in our culture. In their book on the subject, Karine Nahon and Jeff Hemsley write that going viral refers to "a naturally occurring, emergent phenomenon facilitated by the interwoven collection of websites that allow users

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(dis)ability (Schalk *Bodyminds Reimagined* 6). Also, other scholars have also explored how inspiration-related concepts like triumph and overcoming have similarly been taken up differently by black disabled people (Day; Mollow).

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

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

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

The initial gatekeeper signal boost for the video was provided on June 3, 2018, three days after Purnell's original posting. "Because of Them We Can" shared the video on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, all with the same caption: "This young boy just got a new Black Panther-themed prosthetic leg and his priceless reaction is enough to make your entire day," followed by the hashtags #blackboyjoy, #wakandaforever, and #becauseofthemwecan.[13] "Because of Them We Can" is a Black media outlet that Eunique Jones launched in 2013. The outlet emerged from her "desire to share our rich history and promising future through

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

[11] Nahon and Hemsley, 2.

[12] Ibid., 7.

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

images that would refute stereotypes and build the esteem of our children."[14] It is important to note that the video first gained widespread attention through a Black media outlet whose focus is on sharing positive representations of Black people for a predominantly Black audience. This context likely helped shape the video's circulation and attending frameworks as it spread across the internet.

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

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

On June 13, 2018, Purnell's video of Mack received a second wave of attention when Mack, McNeill, and Purnell were all interviewed for the local news. WRAL, the NBC affiliate station in Raleigh, sent reporter Bryan Mims to cover the story. The four minute and thirteen second segment provides an overview of Mack's personal story, as well as the story of how the *Black Panther* prosthetic leg video went viral.[16] Also, on June 13, 2018, Spectrum Local News Central North Carolina posted a video segment about Mack that was just under two minutes in length.[17] The next day, WSOC-TV, the ABC affiliate station in Charlotte produced a segment about Mack, and few days later, on June 18, WTVD, the ABC affiliate station in Durham,

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

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

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

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

produced one as well.[18] The latter three, Spectrum News, WTVD, and WSOC-TV all appear to have used the WRAL original interview footage, though each incorporated some sound bites that were not included in the final version of the WRAL segment.[19]

Finally, between June 14 and June 18, 2018, the content produced by the local North Carolina news stations, primarily those from WRAL and WTVD, were shared by a variety of news and media outlets, including *Yahoo Sports*, *The Root* (the only Black news outlet in this wave of coverage), and local news stations in Cincinnati, Chicago, and New York.[20] With the exception of *The Root*, all of the coverage in this wave emanated from more mainstream sources, with white reporters in the videos creating content for a predominantly white audience. This context too shapes the emphasis and approach taken in the coverage of the viral video in this second wave.

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

Black Boy Joy Meets Inspiration Porn

The media coverage of Purnell's video and of Mack himself is an excellent and illustrative example of how race can impact the framing and reception of content that can be used as inspiration porn. I want to emphasize "can be used" in the previous sentence because, like supercrip, inspiration porn is a narrative framework for presenting content that includes people with disabilities. In other words, images and videos of disabled people are not in and of themselves automatically inspiration porn—a point I hope will become increasing clear

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

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

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

as I analyze the differences in how the video is framed and discussed in the first wave of coverage by Black media outlets versus the second wave of coverage by local, mainstream media outlets.[21] My aim is to both complicate our understanding of inspiration porn, as well as consider whether the term is useful or applicable in the context of non-white disabled people.

First Wave of Media Coverage

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

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

The Black boy joy hashtag appears directly in the title of *The Grio* article and the phrase is used in the body of the articles in *Ebony*, *Madame Noire*, and *BCK Online*, collectively representing over half of the first wave of media coverage.[24] Throughout these articles, the

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

[22] See: BuzzFeedVideo, "What Is Black Boy Joy?"; @chancetherapper, "#Blackboyjoy."

[23] Danielle Young, "On Reclaiming 'Boy' and Giving Young Black Men Something to Celebrate."

[24] Kia Morgan-Smith, "Little Boy's Reaction to Getting a Black Panther Prosthetic Leg Is Pure #Blackboyjoy"; Renese. "This Young Boy's Reaction to Receiving a Black Panther Prosthetic Leg Will Blow You Away"; Christina Santi, "Boy Rejoices

emphasis is primarily on Mack's emotional response at seeing the *Black Panther* prosthetic for the first time, rather than on his "overcoming" disability or on a non-disabled person helping him. [25] This distinction matters, because readers and viewers are invited to share in Mack's joy, rather than be inspired or moved by his mere existence or survival. As the *Madame Noir* article title asserts "This Young Boy's *Reaction* To Receiving A Black Panther Prosthetic Leg Will Blow You Away."[26] In other words, the articles frame the video as something that makes Black people feel good or hopeful in response to a positive representation of a Black child rather than, as inspiration porn does, use a representation of the disabled Other to make those with ability privilege feel better about or more appreciative of their lives. It is important, therefore, in analyzing the use of positive affect in this wave of coverage, to distinguish between emotional frameworks that perpetuate ableist notions that disabled people are in need of help or pity and emotional frameworks like Black boy joy which use positive representations of Black men and boys to resist racist ideologies of Black masculinity. One cannot conflate the way Black media outlets refer to the video as "heartwarming" and other similar terminology with the ableist positive affect created by inspiration porn.[27] To do so would ignore the important cultural context of Black media's history of racial uplift as a goal and the contemporary social media use of positive representations of Black people as inspiration for one another through concepts like Black boy joy and Black girl magic.

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

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after Getting Black Panther-Themed Prosthetic Leg (Video)"; and Tiffany Silva, "Little Boy Gets 'Black Panther' Themed Prosthetic Leg."

[25] The *Blavity* and *Bossip* articles also emphasize Mack's emotional reaction, but do not explicitly use the phrase "black boy joy."

[26] Renese, "This Young Boy's Reaction." Emphasis added.

[27] Santi. Christina. "Boy Rejoices."

[28] Britni Danielle, "This Little Boy Got a 'Black Panther' Themed Prosthetic Leg and His Reaction Will Make Your Day."

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

prosthetic is illustrative of the empowering role media can have for Black people, especially Black children.

As my discussion of these themes suggests, positive affect was used in the first wave of media coverage of the viral video in a way that is racially affirming and uplifting, rather than blatantly ableist. For instance, two articles in this wave use the word "inspiration," but both use it to refer to how Purnell drew inspiration from *Black Panther* to create the artwork for the prosthetic leg.[30] Similar to the assertions of the power of representation, these uses of inspiration draw directly on how this powerful, positive representation of Black heroes and heroines can inspire Black people to view and imagine themselves outside of colonialism and white supremacy. This kind of inspiration is distinct from that of inspiration porn, which uses disabled people (a marginalized group) to inspire nondisabled people (a privileged group) to appreciate their lives/bodies or work harder at achieving their goals. In this case, the articles note the importance of marginalized people creating representations that inspire and empower people within that same marginalized group. In Disability Studies, some scholars have similarly questioned blanket rejection of inspiration used in response to disabled people to consider how inspiration may work within disability communities.[31]

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

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[30] Bossip Staff, "A Lil Positivity: This Young Boy's Reaction to His New 'Black Panther' Themed Prosthetic Leg Is Absolutely Heart-Warming"; Danielle.

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

[32] Morgan-Smith. "Little Boy's Reaction.

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

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

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

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

Second Wave of Media Coverage

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

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

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

Inspiration porn would not be "inspirational," however, if it stopped at representing the disabled subject as pitiful and tragic. This narrative framework becomes insidious because it presents itself as positive and uplifting, as celebrating disabled people even as it still perpetuates ableist ideas of disability as a pitiful tragedy to be overcome through exceptional effort. This turn to inspiration occurred in the second wave of media coverage. Across all four news segments, Mack was described by what Silva and Howe in their work on supercrip narratives call "superlative terminology."[38] The use of superlative terminology that exceptionalized Mack in this wave of media coverage relied on low social expectations for what disabled people can do and focused more on his attitude and presumed overcoming than on the societal and environmental barriers that shape his experience as a Black disabled boy in a racist, ableist world. For example, in this wave of local news stories, Mack was referred to as "an amazing young man" who looks and feels like a superhero, but "needs no suit to be a shining light to others," as he refuses to let an "amputation hold him back."[39]

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[35] Herrschaft, "Local Artist Surprises Boy."

[36] Mims, "Raleigh Boy Given Superhero-Like Powers."

[37] Ibid.

[38] Silva and Howe, "Little Boy Gets "Black Panther" Themed Prosthetic Leg, 186.

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

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

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

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

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

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

[41] Ibid.

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

[43] Danielle; Janay; Renese; Santi.

audience, the latter approach relies on ableist ideas of disabled people as passive object of charity.[44]

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

Conclusion: Implications for Black Disability Studies

As my above comparative analysis of the first and second wave of media coverage of the *Black Panther* prosthetic viral video demonstrates, there is a clear difference between how Black media outlets and local new outlets approached the story. The differences in frameworks and narrative mechanisms employed in the two waves are, I argue, primarily due to the different racial identities of those in the video, those producing the coverage, and those in the intended audience. The impact of race on the presentation and reception of a viral video of a disabled person is therefore important to consider in any work on inspiration porn. My analysis here also demonstrates the need to understand and discuss inspiration porn, like supercrip, as a narrative framework that relies on certain narrative mechanisms to operate. Identifying how these various mechanisms appear and function differently across racial groups is an essential part of developing Disability Studies theoretical frameworks that refuse to be race-neutral and instead seek to understand how race, including whiteness, shapes experiences, representations, and interpretations of disability.

Many concepts and theories of disability were developed through analysis of white disability only. Applying these concepts and theories broadly without accounting for the nuances of a different racial context can result in misinterpretations and faulty analysis. For instance, if one merely looks at the fact that the majority of the Black media outlets took a positive emotional spin on the story by using phrases like "heart-warming," one might be inclined to

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

[45] Edwards, "Wakanda Forever."

[46] Ibid.

label this coverage inspiration porn. But as my analysis demonstrates, the use of positive affect in the first wave coverage was primarily in relationship to concepts of Black boy joy and the power of positive representation rather than as an explicit response to disability. This Black cultural context is essential to interpreting the role of affect in the first wave of media coverage and much would be lost without it.

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

In closing, I want to broaden these arguments beyond inspiration porn alone. Despite the increasing amount of work on race and disability, the field of Disability Studies still needs to account for the ways whiteness informs its foundational theories. We must consider how terms like inspiration porn, supercrip, narrative prosthesis, compulsory able-bodiedness, misfitting, crip, and so on have been primarily developed and used with "whiteness as [their] constitutive underpinning."[47] Scholars throughout the field must acknowledge the whiteness of their work explicitly: Say when the representations in a study are all white and acknowledge when race is not a central analytic.

For those of us doing Critical Race Disability Studies and Black Disability studies in particular, I hope this example of racial differences in the use of inspiration porn frameworks encourages more scholars to assess and explore how other major theoretical concepts in Disability Studies might need to be adjusted or even discarded when analyzing racialized experiences and representations of disability, overall. This is not to say Black Disability Studies needs an entirely different lexicon, but rather that we should not assume concepts developed in regard to white experiences and representations of disability manifest in the exact same way among other races, as I have demonstrated here in regard to inspiration porn. As a result, Critical Race and Black Disability Studies scholars should feel free to adapt or discard the concepts and theories that don't align with the trends and themes we are

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[47] Bell, 275.

discovering in our research. This work can draw on the example of Black Queer Studies and Black Feminist Theory as models for developing new theories, as well as adapting or critiquing those from the wider fields with which we are in conversation. Black Disability Studies should always be grounded in the intellectual history and contemporary conversations of Disability Studies in general, but our work should also never be confined by how white scholars and activists have previously understood, defined, and delimited the field. As my analysis of the *Black Panther* prosthetic viral video indicates, attention to the nuances of racial context, such as uplift ideology or racially specific terms like Black boy joy, can and should change our understanding of the representation of disabled subjects. We need Critical Race approaches to studying the creation, dissemination and impact of inspiration porn and other Disability Studies concepts and frameworks.

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