

Race and disability, two significant categories of difference that shape the social, have often been conceptualized as analogous to each other. Disability has often been described as being “like race” and race as being “like disability” in attempts to shift the experience of disability from the debilitating conceptual space of individual pathology to a broader social recognition of disabled people as members of a political minority. Thus, for example, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (1997) describes disability as a “form of ethnicity” (6), while Lennard Davis (1995) maps similarities between the disabled body and “the body marked as differently pigmented” (80). Foregrounding this analogous relationship between race and disability has helped propel the disability rights movement and disability studies scholarship forward into an alternative space of empowering possibility.

In the field of critical race studies, however, there are few echoes of a similar reciprocity with regard to disability. The act of correlating race and disability is often fraught with violent and oppressive overtones. For example, the historian Douglas Baynton (2001) has noted that “non-white races were routinely connected to people with disabilities . . . [and] depicted as evolutionary laggards or throwbacks” (36) to justify discrimination based on embodied difference from a mythical norm. Literary theorist Hortense Spillers (1987) documents the unimaginable brutality of such discrimination when she describes how the representational and physical

violence meted out to the black captive body during the Middle Passage and slavery enabled the slave's body to become a site where the battered flesh (disability) was transformed into the prime commodity of exchange in a violent conflation of profit and pleasure (Erevelles 2011).

These oppressive overtones continued to echo from within the Enlightenment discourses of the early eighteenth century and much of the nineteenth century, where philosophers like Hume and Kant utilized the analogy between race and disability to distinguish among "different breeds of men." Buttressed by an emerging science that proposed linkages between human anatomy and human capability (and, later, for Freud, the notion that "anatomy is destiny"), the racist practice of eugenic sterilization or selective breeding was institutionalized (Mitchell and Snyder 2003). Eugenic science sought to stem the threat of degeneration by controlling the reproduction of those designated as "feeble-minded," which was fueled in part by the social and economic upheavals caused by industrialization. By the early twentieth century, the concept of feeble-mindedness came to operate as an umbrella term that linked ethnicity, poverty, and gendered and racialized conceptions of immorality together as "the signifier of tainted whiteness" (Stubblefield 2007, 162). The fear of degeneracy associated with a "tainted whiteness" extended not only to Jewish Americans, African Americans, Puerto Ricans, Mexican Americans, Asian Americans, and American Indian women but also to lower-class white women based on their assumed shared "biological" inferiority and their reproductive incapacity to bear children that would assimilate into mainstream white society.

Mitchell and Snyder (2003) argue that it is necessary to recognize eugenics as a transatlantic cultural exchange—what they call the "eugenic Atlantic"—to mark how the discourse of disability was deployed

throughout the European colonial diaspora. In this context, the concept of disability justified oppressive social, political, cultural, and economic policies based on the argument that racial difference and class inequalities represented pathological defects otherwise known as "disability." These ideologies of disability enabled European expansionists to justify the conquest of racialized others while simultaneously retrieving "an unspoiled, pre-modern version of an ever more complex western self" (848). With its commitment to a doctrine of human purity, eugenic science continued to erase the "histories, bodies, [and]/or cultures" (Jarman 2006, 149–150) of despised Others, as manifested in "protective" practices like genocide, forced sterilizations, rigid miscegenation laws, and residential segregation in ghettos, barrios, reservations, and state institutions like prisons and asylums.

In an ironic twist, the very same pathologized bodies made to disappear from polite society via regulatory or eugenic practices were rendered highly visible as "freaks" and transformed into spectacles for popular consumption and economic profit (James and Wu 2006; Adams 2001; Garland-Thomson 1997). For instance, the public's morbid fascination with the sexualized bodies of Saartjie Baartman, the South African woman known as the "Hottentot Venus," or other racialized freaks such as Ota Benga, and Hiram and Barney Davis, "the Wild Men of Borneo," was proof of the brutal conflation of race and disability. Such racial freaks were collectively represented to the public as the unbearable physical excesses that had to be shed to confer entry into the realm of normalcy (Adams 2001). Thus, for example, both scientists and policy makers involved in the "eugenic Atlantic" and proprietors and showmen involved in the freak show circuit presumed that it was the "natural" deviance of disability ascribed to the racialized body that constituted it as either the despised Other or the



profitable freak. In both cases, science and entertainment referenced “‘race’ as the social locus of ascribed insufficiency while leaving disability as the default category of ‘real’ human incapacity” (Mitchell and Snyder 2003, 851).

Given this history, it has been difficult for critical race scholars to conceptually engage with the category of disability beyond the simplistic and problematic assertion that there is an analogous relationship between race and disability. Claiming that “race is like disability” or that “disability is like race” does nothing to engage the complex ways in which race and disability are imbricated in the construction of the pathological Other. For example, when disability is invoked in critical discourses of race, it usually suffers from what Chris Ewart (2010) has described as *disappropriation*. Here disability is used “to affirm (an often subordinate) voice to elucidate agency and figurative empathy for other oppressed and exploited populations” (152). Used in this context, critical race scholars, such as Stuart Hall, have described the life experiences of a racialized subject as “crippling” and “deforming.” In doing so, they fail to recognize that, rather than rejecting oppressive biological criteria, they unwittingly reaffirm an imagined biological wholeness (normativity) that was instrumental in the propagation of the same oppressive ideologies they were seeking to dismantle in the first place (Erevelles 2011). They inadvertently deploy disability as a master trope of disqualification that one should escape rather than embrace.

Rather than treating the analogous relationship between race and disability as prosthetic metaphor and/or nuanced intervention, it may be necessary to engage the historical contexts and structural conditions within which the identity categories of race and disability intersect. For example, special education classes became the spaces where African American and Latino students

were ghettoized even after the *Brown v. Board of Education* legislation, which was supposed to make segregation on the basis of race in education unacceptable (Connor and Ferri 2005; Artiles 2011). But in recognizing the conjunction of race and disability rather than highlighting only one or the other, race and disability become clearly interdependent as disabled subjectivities are racialized and racialized subjects are disabled simultaneously. Blanchett, Klingner, and Harry (2009) have illustrated how the politics of race, class, and disability intersect when students of color in low-income, high-poverty schools “become” mildly mentally retarded and emotionally disturbed. Even when compensatory services are available, white privilege and institutional racism obstruct access to these services. Additionally, these students of color find themselves in the most segregated and punitive spaces in the public school system—social conditions that often extend into their adult lives via the school-to-prison pipeline (Erevelles 2011). Thus, in the historical context of *Brown v. Board of Education*, the oppressive practices of white supremacy and pedagogical ableism were mutually constitutive.

Social conditions of poverty also contribute to racialized subjects “becoming” disabled. The incidence of physical and mental illness in people of color communities, for instance, differs drastically from that of their white counterparts. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, African American children are disproportionately more likely to suffer from exposure to lead and toxic waste, well-known causes of developmental delays, because they are disproportionately more likely to live in old and run-down housing with lead pipes and peeling lead paint near hazardous waste sites (Stubblefield 2009; Erevelles 2011). Furthermore, people of color, especially African Americans, are less likely to be diagnosed with depression or prescribed medication when they report symptoms to a doctor,

and are also institutionalized involuntarily more often, in part because racial stereotypes affect psychiatrists' assessments of their "dangerousness" (Mollow 2006, 74; Metzl 2011). Extending beyond the local context of the United States, in neocolonial and postcolonial contexts, war and intra-ethnic strife create actual physical disabilities as well as trauma in societies where there are few economic, social, and emotional supports. Race drastically transforms the life experience of becoming disabled and living with disability in both historical and contemporary contexts.

While it may be politically expedient for disability studies scholars to argue that disability is the most universal of human conditions because almost anyone can become disabled (Garland-Thomson 1997), there is often an implicit assumption that the acquisition of a disabled identity always occurs outside historical context. But rather than conceiving of "disability" and "race" as interchangeable tropes in order to foreground the ubiquity of oppression, the categories of race/ethnicity and disability might be better invoked to demonstrate how they constitute one another through social, political, economic, and cultural practices that have kept seemingly different groups of people in strikingly similar marginalized positions (James and Wu 2006; Erevelles 2011). Thus, more robust and complex analyses of race and disability are necessary for us to move beyond the initial conceptual space of analogy.