

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

RESOURCES OF FORM: DISABILITY, RACE, AND THE AMERICAN LITERARY
IMAGINATION, 1952–2012

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ABSTRACT

Resources of Form offers four readings of four American novels that are grappling with the ongoing, powerful effects of American racism, and traces how each stages a challenge to dominant accounts of disability as individual brokenness, unlivable incapacity, or radical alterity. Each text finds and explores an object named by disability, and does so in a scene organized by multiple racial narratives: disability and race are put into relation to one another via metaphor; as a relationship of cause and effect; one as reprieve from another; or as prompting analogous visual events. In tracking and describing these imaginative moves, *Resources of Form* responds to disability studies' desire to revise its understandings of disability as a distinct category, something that can be critically isolated from racialized experience. It also addresses a potentially limiting overattachment to disability's referential stability as a category that has filtered into literary disability studies scholarship: in its major texts, disability is understood to refer to some real difference such that disability is always extraordinariness.

Each of the novels under consideration here engage with dominant understandings of disability, what we might call individual/medical model disability projects, but each is also committed to representing everyday realities. By tracking these novels' descriptive accounts of American ordinaries, I argue that literary form committed to everyday realities has long represented disabled embodiment as a set of practices and a mode of operating rather than incapacity or lack. Alongside and in the same scene as processes of racial formation, these descriptive accounts of disabled embodiment figure it as engaged in practices of making do and living on in what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has described as a reparative mode.

Chapter One, "The Lower Frequencies: Cripistemologies of Race in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*," attends to how Ellison's novel moves beyond its initial, titular equation of blindness with racist misrecognition, deeply flawed knowing. This chapter gives an account—one that is as yet still

missing in the literature on Ellison's novel—of how blindness is not just the absence of vision or a deeply flawed vision, but also a disabled, crip way of moving through the world and accessing knowledge. For an epistemological project centered on how to discern “what is really happening when your eyes were looking through,” a blindness metaphor articulates the problem of American racism, but nonsightedness is also narrated as a way of operating imbued with intense experiences of belonging, it's a predicate of the oppressed as well as the oppressor, *and* it's the sound- and touch-attuned mode for operating and making a life under such conditions.

Chapter Two, “The Time is Out of Joint: Deafness and Injury in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*,” takes up another novel from the African American canon that rewrites the historical Margaret Garner case, in which a woman escaped from slavery and committed infanticide under the threat of being remanded to her owner as property. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* imagines Margaret Garner as a woman named Sethe years after the infanticide, whose home has been haunted by the spirit of the baby ghost; when a man from Sethe's past arrives and kicks the ghost out, Sethe's murdered daughter appears in her yard as a fully grown, embodied revenant. *Beloved* is full of disability, most commonly as acquired via physical or psychic injury under slavery. But Beloved, the revenant, and her sister Denver have non-normative embodiments that are not as directly caused by an injury but which do follow from Sethe's murderous actions. This chapter reads the thicket of meanings attached to Denver's temporary deafness and the way soundlessness attunes her differently to the normal and paranormal world. If we attend to Denver's disability and her shifting modes of being-with specters and being-with her family's injury, *Beloved* forces us to distinguish the harm of injury from its effects. Injury is violence, something we do not want in our futures; and it has effects—disability, embodied and enminded variation—that are not themselves exclusive of a desirable future. In fact, as we see with Denver, they can enable particular arts of living. The nature of the

shifts in Denver's embodiment—written as they are as less-than-simple instances of loss—encourages what I term a *trans-ability* account of injury under slavery.

Chapter Three, “Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho*, Care, and Racialized Misfitting,” starts by tracking *American Psycho* in terms of its resonances with Ellison’s novel, *Invisible Man*. *American Psycho* transposes the invisible man’s message about the “lessons of [his] life” as a black man onto a white Wall Street financier, Patrick Bateman, who is a serial killer. Both texts raise a question about madness and response: in a number of scenes, as Michael Clark has argued, the novel dramatizes a demand that the reader respond to Patrick by depicting his attempts to confess his crimes to his white, yuppie peers, and his failure to get any kind of reply. The form of the novel also challenges readers to respond by taxing their ability to sustain an engagement: the narration takes on incredible levels of minute detail not only about the electronics, designer apparel, and fine cuisine that Patrick conspicuously consumes, but also about the violent acts of torture, rape, and murder that he commits. In response to the challenge the book sets, this chapter tracks how Patrick articulates madness and murder as a kind of reprieve from his experience of whiteness. Patrick confesses that his greatest desire is “fit[ting] in,” and he diligently cultivates his own belonging to the white, male, heterosexual, able-bodied norm of abstract personhood. Patrick asserts his madness as confession or threat when his approximation of the norm makes him show up as an ineffectual “boy next door,” or when, because he and other white male Wall Street types are functionally interchangeable, he experiences the mental distress of an existential meaninglessness. This chapter tracks the handful of scenes that take place outside of Patrick’s usual yuppie circles, in which the novel stages scenes of recognition and response from an immigrant taxi driver, Chinese dry cleaners, and the proprietors of a kosher deli. These readings rely on Margaret Price’s account of care in a scene of mental misfitting to notice these scenes’ dynamics of response and engagement, and argue that alongside a breakdown in communication, two of these scenes offer an outside to Patrick’s white interchangeability: his

actions are recognized as significant and he is arrested or at least suspended in a scene in ways that demand an account (and presume its possibility).

Chapter Four, “The Graphic Ordinary: Composing Visual Experiences of Disability and Race in Chris Ware’s *Building Stories*,” explicates Chris Ware’s careful attention to form and the potentialities of the comics medium in order to recognize how *Building Stories* pushes against the grain of conventional ways of visual knowing that attribute eventfulness to disabled and nonwhite bodies. Through compositional choices and directly thematized scenes of looking, the form of *Building Stories* interrupts processes of visual reading in order to push readers into experiences of looking. I argue that *Building Stories* accomplishes this interruption of conventional seeing not by substituting alternate iconography (that is, not by drawing with a certain style); but by exploiting the possibilities of the graphic narrative, composing a set of relations between varying appearances for race and disability; and it foregrounds what Wittgenstein would call visual experiences, experiences of changing seeings-as for disability and race. As I explicate how *Building Stories* makes perceptual practices perceptible, I focus on four narrative and compositional strategies for rendering disability and race ordinary. First, as disabled and black bodies are materialized across multiple panels, they are compositionally and narratively de-dramatized. Second, I read how dominant understandings of disability as something that precludes sexual desirability is raised in the textual register two particular narratives, but undercut by the silent, visual narration; likewise, another disability narrative is suggested and undone by readers’ layered encounter with a complex page layout that produces an at-a-glance visual experience in addition to the narrative experience of reading through each of the panels. Third, I turn to scenes where Ware’s text calls attention to disabled and racial figures’ status as images that elicit dominant visual experiences of seeing a person *as* a disabled person or *as* a black person, one in which the protagonist ruminates over a woman’s shock in seeing her leg on public transit and one in which a police sketch of a black man reads as a racial caricature when juxtaposed

with his mug shot in the panels' drawings. These narratives both work to complicate the referential power of these depicted visual experiences of disability and race. Finally, I read how *Building Stories* recalibrates what's seen-as disability and what's seen-as race via visual resonances that complicate the usual family resemblances between bodies.

INTRODUCTION, Resources of Form: Disability, Race, and the American Literary

Imagination, 1952–2012

...there are important phenomenological and theoretical tasks that can be accomplished only through local theories and nonce taxonomies; the potentially innumerable mechanisms of their relation to stronger theories remain matters of art and speculative thought.
(Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 145)

The chapters that make up this dissertation project perform close readings of four American novels that are grappling with the ongoing, powerful effects of American racism, and trace how each novel stages a challenge to dominant understandings of disability as individual brokenness, unlivable incapacity, radical alterity. The readings offered here focus on the ways each text finds and explores an object named by disability in a scene organized by multiple racial projects.¹ In tracking and describing these imaginative moves, *Resources of Form* responds to disability studies' desire to revise its understandings of disability as a distinct category, something that can be critically isolated from racialized experience. It also addresses a certain attachment to disability as a fixed identity, a coherent, reliable form of difference. Following from accounts of disability's demarcation as a historically contingent, co-constituting outside to what bodies should be and do, including Robert McRuer's work on compulsory able-bodiedness, the field has begun to expand the reach of its object

¹ The term *racial projects* comes from Michael Omi and Harold Winant's racial formation theory, which conceptualizes race as comprised of multiple heterogeneous racial "projects," offering a rejoinder to conceptions of race as a stable and coherent entity in the world. Racial formation is defined as "the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed," and the racial projects that comprise racial formation processes are various connections between "what race *means* in a particular discursive practice and the ways in which both social structures and everyday experiences are racially *organized*, based upon that meaning"(185, italics original). On the macro level, racial projects are the versions of race assumed in arguing for certain policy strategies; on the micro-level of the everyday, racial projects direct "the many ways in which, often unconsciously, we 'notice' race"(188). *Racial Formation in the United States*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2015).

beyond “the big three” of physical disability, deafness, and blindness. Disability studies increasingly understands fatness, chronic illness like diabetes and HIV/AIDS, and mental disabilities (psychiatric disabilities, cognitive/intellectual disabilities, autism, traumatic brain injury, dementia) to fall under its purview.² While the field has been more than willing to embrace work that critiques disability as a term that names a fixed, stable category, there is a consistent return and deliberate fortification of disability as a (fixed, stable) politicized identity, a return and fortification motivated by continuing, dire material circumstances for disabled people and the difficulty with which a group identity has been forged in the first place. For example, McRuer’s crip theory understands disability as a product of compulsory able-bodiedness, a hegemony that is always in danger of collapse, and as a critical mode, crip theory “can continuously invoke, in order to further the crisis, the inadequate resolutions that compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory able-bodiedness offer us.” McRuer takes care to stipulate that crip theory would resist any move to identify particular kinds of bodies and abilities that either “are acceptable or that will bring about change,” instead functioning “not as a thing, but as a resistance to the norm” itself.³ Still, McRuer writes that although crip theory should be understood as having a “contestatory relationship” with disability studies and disability identity, “crip theory does not—perhaps paradoxically—seek to dematerialize disability identity.”⁴ I do not take these commitments to be mutually exclusive, and I want to affirm the “institutionality and political fabric” of disability identity, the way it has enabled a distinct disability culture and disability

² Compulsory able-bodiedness explicates the able-bodied norm—which Lennard Davis has shown is historically grounded in the modern nation-state, eugenics, and industrial capitalism’s demand for (standardized) labor—as operating as a normativity. Pointing to Michael Berube’s account of the repeated question posed to him, *In the end, aren’t you disappointed to have a retarded child?*, McRuer writes, “The culture asking such questions assumes in advance that we all agree: able-bodied identities, able-bodied perspectives are preferable and what we all, collectively, are aiming for.” *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: NYU Press, 2006), 9. See also Lennard Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (New York: Verso, 1995).

³ McRuer, *Crip Theory*, 31.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 35.

activism.⁵ But *Resources of Form* works to address the way this desire for disability's referential stability has filtered into literary disability studies scholarship: in its major texts, representations of disability are understood to refer to some stable difference, distinction, extraordinariness.

Each of the novels under consideration here engage with dominant understandings of disability, what we might call individual/medical model disability projects. Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) starts from a metaphor that equates blindness with ignorance and deficient knowing, in order to articulate the way race organizes everyday experience for black Americans as invisibility. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) represents disability as a condition of being broken down via injury that directly relates to black human beings' being-made-object as property under slavery. Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* presents an ultra-normal, white, conservative, wealthy protagonist whose madness manifests as murderous impulse, goading many readers into easy condemnation of madness as aberrant life to be annihilated. Chris Ware's graphic novel, *Building Stories* (2012), takes up two analogous representational problems deriving from disability and blackness' *noticeability* as being or having a problem, that is, their lack of access to unmarked, abstract personhood in American visual practices.

For all of these texts, literary narrative is invested in writing everyday life: Ellison writes that "there is value for the writer in trying to give as thorough a report of social reality as possible";⁶

⁵ Mel Y. Chen, "Tranimacies: An Interview with Mel Y. Chen," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 2, no. 2 (May 2015): 322. This commitment to disability as a coherent, reliable category is especially understandable, given that the still incredibly influential individual/medical model of understanding disability has made it difficult to forge a group identity. The individual/medical model figures the normate body as a natural fact, and disability as an individual defect, lack, or pathology. By this understanding, disability is a concern for individuals, and medical therapies that rehabilitate or cure are the proper response. Disability identity is made possible by the social model's revolutionary shift, which puts the body to the side in order to argue that the problem is located in attitudinal, institutional, and physical barriers that exclude a whole segment of the population, and the proper response is structural change.

⁶ Quoted in Kenneth Warren, *So Black and Blue: Ralph Ellison and the Occasion of Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 23.

Morrison has remarked that her fiction communicates "the kind of information you can find between the lines of history...It's right there in the intersection where an institution becomes personal, where the historical becomes people with names";⁷ in a recent interview, Bret Easton Ellis has said that *American Psycho* "initiated because [of] my own isolation and alienation at a point in my life. I was living like Patrick Bateman. I was slipping into a consumerist kind of void that was supposed to give me confidence and make me feel good about myself but just made me feel worse and worse and worse about myself. That is where the tension of 'American Psycho'[sic] came from";⁸ and Ware articulates his project as a cartoonist as one of getting at "an ever closer representation of what it feels like to be alive."⁹ *Resources of Form* tracks how these commitments produce narratives that are alive to the embodiments that disability names as more replete ways of interfacing with a world and operating in it than dominant, medical/individual model understandings can capture, even if those understandings are invoked.

In other words, the novel as a form, both prose and graphic, has particular potential for taking up Eli Clare's challenge to pay attention to "the daily realities of our bodies."¹⁰ Clare writes, "we need to do this because there are disability activists so busy defining disability as an external social condition that they neglect the daily realities of our bodies[...] We need to do this because there are disability thinkers who can talk all day about the body as a metaphor and symbol but never mention flesh and blood, bone and tendon."¹¹ Clare's call for attention to the lived experience of the

⁷ Rachel Adams, "The Black Look and the 'Spectacle of Whitefolks': Wildness in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," in *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong: The Black Female Body in American Culture*, ed. Kimberly Wallace-Sanders (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 154.

⁸ Bret Easton Ellis, "Q&A: Bret Easton Ellis Talks about Writing Books, Making Movies," by Jeff Baker, *OregonLive.com*, July 7, 2010, http://www.oregonlive.com/books/index.ssf/2010/07/qa_bret_easton_ellis_talks_abo.html

⁹ Aida Edemariam, "The Art of Melancholy," *The Guardian*, October 31, 2005, <http://arts.guardian.co.uk/features/story/0,,1605193,00.html>

¹⁰ Eli Clare, "Stolen Bodies, Reclaimed Bodies," *Public Culture* 13, no.3 (Fall 2001): 364.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

body responds to a sense that theoretical accounts can be reductive and poorly equipped to articulate important aspects of living with a bodymind identified as disabled. In that the novel proceeds as a series of narrated events, interactions, ruminations, and feelings in the everyday lives of its characters, it offers description and story in a way that makes it possible to represent embodiment as what Kathleen Stewart would call ordinary. Stewart's *Ordinary Affects* suggests that terms like neoliberalism or advanced capitalism

do not in themselves begin to describe the situation we find ourselves in. The notion of a totalized system, of which everything is always already somehow a part, is not helpful (to say the least) in the effort to approach a weighted and reeling present. This is not to say that the forces these systems name are not real and literally pressing. On the contrary, I am trying to bring them into view as a scene of immanent force, rather than leave them looking like dead effects imposed on an innocent world.¹²

Stewart's ethnography of the ordinary proceeds as a series of narrative vignettes that depict interactions between neighbors, being stuck in traffic, or scenes from a talk show. The prose and graphic novel's narrative produces similar "contact zone[s] for analysis" as opposed to proceeding by a series of theses or proposing rubrics of cause and effect that organize all phenomena.

Resources of Form takes it as axiomatic that literary narrative's descriptive accounting for what it makes aesthetic worlds. For the novels under consideration here, these worlds are what Eric Hayot would call Realist aesthetic worlds. A key aspect of this understanding is an insistence that rather than being merely referential, better or worse copies of *the* world as a pre-existing thing, literary worlds are self-contained totalities that "mak[e] and [are], in other words, and in the broadest philosophical sense, a physics."¹³ Though they are self-contained totalities, Hayot writes,

Aesthetic worlds, no matter how they form themselves, are among other things always a relation to and theory of the lived world, whether as a largely preconscious normative construct, a rearticulation, or even an active refusal of the world-norms of their age. In this sense they are also always social and conceptual constructs, as well as formal and affective

¹² Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 1.

¹³ Eric Hayot, *On Literary Worlds* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 24.

ones.¹⁴

All of the novels analyzed here are Realist in Hayot's sense,¹⁵ in that they affirm the world-content and world-norms of particular American times and spaces: a Southern black college and New York City just after World War II; the border between a slave state and a free state before and after emancipation; Manhattan in the late 1980s; Chicago and Oak Park at the turn of the 21st century. But insofar as these worlds are "self-organizing, self-enclosed, and self-referential totalit[ies]," they do not in fact coincide with the world though they stage a recognizable context. Thus, for example, *Beloved* materializes a world in which the paranormal is apparent and in which hauntings and revenants are daily realities alongside prison camps, plantation slavery, and domestic scenes of baking bread.

Martin Heidegger's essay, "The Origin of the Work of Art" is particularly helpful for understanding the conceptually generative potential of the work of art as something that sets forth a world in this way. Heidegger proposes that rather than providing good imitations or correct portrayals, what a work of art accomplishes is the setting forth of a world, a disclosure of what is, a letting-happen of the open. Ultimately, he claims that "...art is by nature an origin: a distinctive way in which truth comes into being, that is, becomes historical."¹⁶ In the work of art (for our purposes, in these novels), we are presented with a world, the disclosure of beings, toward which we might contemplatively turn ourselves. As he famously analyzes Vincent Van Gogh's painting of peasant boots, Heidegger articulates the significance of this worlding as a refutation of the "exclusive reality" of what went before—that is, while New York City in the late 80s had a Wall Street and a yuppie

¹⁴ Ibid., 44–45.

¹⁵ Hayot proposes that we think of Realism, Romanticism, and Modernism as modalities, varying relationships of affirmation or refusal to the world-concept and world-content of *the* world.

¹⁶ Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Perennial Classics, 1971), 75.

culture, *American Psycho* sets forth a world that, even as it affirms that world-content, materializes as its own particular set of relations, meanings, and possibilities. It is the aesthetic world that matters, becomes material, and that can be “contemplatively turn[ed] toward” in order to articulate presences for what the concepts race and disability index but don’t totally capture. This understanding has affinities to Jasbir Puar’s critique of both racialized identity and disability identity as “ontologically presumptuous”(63), “the byproducts of attempts to still and quell the perpetual motion of assemblages, to capture and reduce them”(50).¹⁷ Heidegger asserts that art objects stage an encounter with, or access to, an emergent scene of being that can contain what is already understood, plus this abundance and overflow of not-as-yet disconcealed being. Herein lies the potential for literary worlds to nudge us to encounter disability and race not as fixed, stable entities that come into view in ways that conform to our working concepts for them, but as elements in a wider and more disarticulated body of phenomena. Heidegger writes, “there is much in being that man cannot master, there is but little that comes to be known. What is known remains inexact, what is mastered insecure. What is, is never of our making or even merely the product of our minds, as it might all too easily seem.”¹⁸

This present but perhaps not yet known, graspable but perhaps not yet masterable being—materialized by literary form—is the potentially pedagogical object that *Resources of Form* pursues. By tracking these novels’ descriptive accounts of American ordinaries, I argue that literary form committed to everyday realities has long represented disabled embodiment as a set of practices and a

¹⁷ Jasbir Puar, “‘I Would Rather Be a Cyborg Than a Goddess’: Becoming-Intersectional in Assemblage Theory,” *philoSOPHIA* 2, no. 1 (2012): 49–66.

¹⁸ Heidegger, “Origin of the Work of Art,” 51. This understanding of being posits that there is some being that we access by knowing it as disability, at the same time that it posits that the concept isn’t ever quite adequate to the thing; this amounts to a Butlerian critique of disability (insofar as Heidegger says that “when we contemplate this whole as one, then we apprehend, so it appears, all that is—though we grasp it crudely enough” and Butler argues that the norm has a weakness to be worked, that it repeats itself so insistently because it is continually failing, its grasp is crude).

mode of operating rather than incapacity or lack.¹⁹ Beside and in the same scene as racial formation processes, these descriptive accounts of disabled embodiment figure it as engaged in practices of making do and living on in a reparative mode. Reparativity, as Eve Sedgwick has explicated it, derives from Melanie Klein's depressive position, and it's a mode of relating to the world and the objects in it. The depressive position, as opposed to the paranoid position's alertness to danger, "is an anxiety-mitigating achievement [...] the position from which it is possible in turn to use one's own resources to assemble or 'repair' the murderous part-objects into something like a whole [...]. Once assembled to one's own specifications, the more satisfying object is available both to be identified with and to offer one nourishment and comfort in return."²⁰ There are strategically compelling reasons to continue paranoid critical practices of explicating the ableist underpinnings of our cultural narratives, rooting out and uncovering how our conceptual, cultural, and state apparatuses work to devalue, disenfranchise, and destroy disabled lives. Though disability studies has enjoyed a certain institutional incorporation in higher education, disability is not yet on the radar as a critical category for many scholars, including those working on American literature and critics of race and representation. *Resources of Form* generates accounts of literary form's capacity to write embodiment on the level of everyday practices and explore its possible, various, relationships to other bodies or concepts.

Disability studies has widely acknowledged how the field's grounding in a single-issue politics has failed to address disability's relationship to race. Chris Bell's 2006 essay, "Introducing White Disability Studies: A Modest Proposal," has proven to be one of the most influential internal

¹⁹ Or, on the flip side of the same coin, an embodiment characterized by wondrous, surprising capacity, or a particular political forcefulness.

²⁰ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You," in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 128.

critiques to disability studies to date. Bell writes of a “fragile relationship between disability, race, and ethnicity” in disability studies, calling the field out for having not yet meaningfully engaged with issues of race and ethnicity, and for writing and speaking of “disability” in ways that assume a white constituency.²¹ Since Bell’s piece was published, the culture of the field has been changing: special issues dedicated to disability and ethnicity and disability and indigeneity have been published,²² Bell has edited a volume of essays called *Blackness and Disability*, and disability studies has maintained a consistent presence at the conferences of organizations like the Critical Ethnic Studies Association. Josh Lukin’s account of disability and blackness delves into oral histories of the Disability Rights Movement in order to explain the belatedness of these developments, recounting the ways both the ableism of black activist groups and the inattention to racial injustice in the mostly-white disability rights movement marginalized disabled people of color.²³ Focused on single-issue politics, these groups’ agenda weren’t addressing issues that concerned disabled people of color, and people affected by both ableism and racism were asked to code-switch. With an article that responds to Bell’s critique, Susan Schweik has offered a revision to “whitewashed” 504 historiography, the usual accounts of a twenty-five day sit-in protest at the Department of Housing, Education, and Welfare in San Francisco, one that forced legislators to retain the protections against disability discrimination in Section 504 of the 1973 Federal Rehabilitation Act.²⁴ Schweik traces the ways in which the Black Panther Party became instrumental to the success of the direct action that inaugurated the disability

²¹ Chris Bell, “Introducing White Disability Studies: A Modest Proposal,” in *The Disability Studies Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Lennard J. Davis (New York: Routledge, 2006), 278.

²² See Jennifer C. James and Cynthia Wu, eds., “Race, Ethnicity, Disability, and Literature,” special issue, *MELUS* 31, no. 3 (Fall 2006); and Clare Barker and Siobhan Senior, eds., “Disability and Indigeneity,” special issue, *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* 7, no. 2 (2013).

²³ Josh Lukin, “Disability and Blackness,” in *The Disability Studies Reader*, 4th ed., edited by Lennard J. Davis, 308–315 (New York: Routledge, 2013).

²⁴ Susan Schweik, “Lomax’s Matrix: Disability, Solidarity, and the Black Power of 504,” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (2011). doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v31i1.1371>

rights movement: because of their commitment to two Black Panther disability activists participating in the protest, Brad Lomax and Chuck Jackson, the BPP committed to providing daily material support and supported the cause in their newsletters.

As Lukin notes, these scholarly efforts to consider how matters of race and disability intersect have produced essays now considered part of the disability studies canon. Lukin points to Jennifer James's account of a postbellum "black politics of rehabilitation" that resisted any association between blackness and disability (because disability has historically functioned as the grounds for racist understandings of African Americans as biologically inferior) and Anna Mollow's analysis of Meri Nana-Ama Danquah's depression memoir, which argues that Danquah's black, immigrant disability experience invites revisions of orthodox disability studies orientations (problematizing not forced participation in medical institutions, for example, but rather lack of access to medical care).

But still, in a recent forum for the Journal of the Cultural Studies Association, Julie Minich and her respondents call attention to "the field's persistent difficulty in addressing questions of race," Minich elaborates:

The continued paucity of work on race and disability is particularly troubling because disability is so highly racialized—both in the sense that disability is disproportionately concentrated within communities of color, which receive unequal health care and experience elevated risk of experiencing workplace injuries, environmental contamination, and state violence, and in the sense that disability is often used rhetorically to reinforce white supremacy (just as it is also used to reinforce heteropatriarchy, transphobia, colonialism, and capitalist exploitation).²⁵

²⁵ Julie Avril Minich, "Enabling Whom? Critical Disability Studies Now," *Lateral* 5, no. 1 (2016): <http://csalateral.org/issue/1/forum-alt-humanities-critical-disability-studies-now-minich/>. See also Jina B. Kim, "Toward a Crip of Color Critique: Thinking with Minich's 'Enabling Whom?'," *Lateral* 6, no.1 (2017): <http://csalateral.org/issue/6-1/forum-alt-humanities-critical-disability-studies-crip-of-color-critique-kim/> and Sami Schalk, "Critical Disability Studies as Methodology," *Lateral* 6, no.1 (2017): <http://csalateral.org/issue/6-1/forum-alt-humanities-critical-disability-studies-methodology-schalk/>

Less recognized than this “continued paucity of work on race and disability” is literary disability studies’ potentially limiting overattachment to extraordinariness, which tends to read disability as radical difference coded either negative (reifying the dominant understandings of the individual/medical model) or positive (resisting or subverting norms). That is, literary disability studies has yet to develop a critical language for how the ordinary, lived experience of the body is given presence in literary representations of disability. Currently available accounts of how disability representation functions share a persistent underlying assumption that because of the power of dominant socio-cultural understandings, disability in literature is always the figuration of alterity rather than variation, “mere” metaphor rather than literal embodiment, a too-powerful element that deforms form.

Literary disability studies has proliferated exponentially over the last ten years: book series are being announced, and more monographs than I can count on my normate hands have been published in just the last five years. The texts that take up what it means to consider literary representation, however, are a smaller handful: the most circulated are Rosemarie Garland Thomson’s *Extraordinary Bodies*, Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell’s *Narrative Prosthesis*, and somewhat more recently, Ato Quayson’s *Aesthetic Nervousness*. As Garland Thomson calls for a critical examination of disability figures as discursive objects, she understands disability representation as having the potential to run counter to dominant understandings of disability. The way it does so, however, is by virtue of extraordinariness coded as positive rather than negative. She reads black, female disability figures in Ann Petry, Toni Morrison, and Audre Lorde, for example, as defiant figures celebrated and integrated into a black nationalist oppositional identity.²⁶ By this

²⁶ This in contradistinction to the pitiable objects of “benevolent maternalism” that she reads in the fiction of middle-class white woman authors of the 19th century. Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 18.

account, the physically disabled figure is always an extraordinary body, whether that extraordinariness is one of abjection or distinction.

Snyder and Mitchell point to literary representation as potentially transformative and pedagogical, in that it “not only deploy[s] but explicitly foreground[s] the ‘play’ of multiple meanings as a facet of their discursive production.” Literary texts, they go on to argue, “share a literary objective of destabilizing sedimented cultural meanings that accrue around ideas of bodily ‘deviance’[...and a] self-reflexive mode of address about their own textual production of disabled bodies.”²⁷ I highlight these points at length because they articulate some of the assumptions my own project makes about the richness of literary discourse and its potential to make meaning against the grain of common sense. But while my readings focus on and affirm these aspects of literary texts, Snyder and Mitchell take the rather extreme position of raising literature’s potential in order to conclude that, ultimately, representations of disability sabotage literature’s generativity. Disability representation as narrative prosthesis, they argue, “operates as the textual obstacle that causes the literary operation of open-endedness to close down or stumble.”²⁸ They develop *narrative prosthesis* to name a “perpetual discursive dependency” on disability as a stock feature of characterization in literary representations, a sort of cheap trick that endows a literary figure with symbolic potency or absolute singularity.²⁹ By their account, literary texts exploit the socially-derived aesthetic power of the disabled body in a kind of “metaphorical opportunism,”³⁰ and it’s the “historical conundrum of disability” that it causes “an otherwise permeable and dynamic narrative form” to close down or

²⁷ David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2000), 48.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 50.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

stumble.³¹ What's strange about this account is the conviction that disability representation can only be problematic, ableist—explicating representations of disability is always already explicating ableist ideology. As Anita Silvers has pointed out, this “conspiratorial interpretation [...] assumes that society's disregard of disabled people cannot help but pervade our art,” slanting all considerations of disability's representation in literature toward indictment.³²

Ato Quayson's *Aesthetic Nervousness* begins to develop an alternative as it takes up a critique of narrative prosthesis, but remains stuck in an understanding of disability as always disruptive to literary representation. Quayson's central critique of narrative prosthesis is that it jumps immediately from literary representation to sociocultural reality, understanding disability representation as beholden to extra-textual, socio-cultural understandings of disability. With Silvers, Quayson pushes back at narrative prosthesis's flattened understanding of how disability is present in literary narrative, writing that with close textual analysis, “we find that even if programmatic roles were originally assigned [to disabled characters], these roles can shift quite suddenly.”³³ Quayson loosens the conceptual “stumbling” from Snyder and Mitchell's original claim, retheorizing the presence of disability in a literary text as something that causes a *formal* stumbling that he calls *aesthetic nervousness*. In short, aesthetic nervousness is an irruption in the aesthetic domain (differing dispositions of symbols and motifs, changes in narrative perspective, reversals of plot structure, etc.) that happens in a literary text when disability comes onto the scene. While Quayson conceives of literary narrative as having great potential in its liveness to shake up dominant understandings of disability,

³¹ The metaphor of a prosthetic that causes one to stumble is particularly fraught, insofar as it figures the prosthetized body as always clumsy and debilitated.

³² Anita Silvers, “The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Disability, Ideology, and the Aesthetic,” in *Disability/Postmodernity: Embodying Disability Theory*, eds. Mairian Corker and Tom Shakespeare (New York: Continuum, 2002), 232.

³³ Ato Quayson, *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 25.

he argues that these processes of complex representation leave a formal wake—“the restless dialectic of representation may unmoor [a disabled character] from the programmatic location and place her elsewhere as the dominant aesthetic protocols governing the representation are short-circuited.”³⁴

Aesthetic nervousness is a concept that still figures disability as always provocative, extra-ordinary, problematic. He writes,

Ultimately, aesthetic nervousness has to be seen as coextensive with the nervousness regarding the disabled in the real world. The embarrassment, fear, and confusion that attend the disabled in their everyday reality is translated in literature and the aesthetic field into a series of structural devices that betray themselves when the disability representation is seen predominantly from the perspective of the disabled rather than from the normative position of the nondisabled.³⁵

I’m skeptical of the assumption here that close reading—noticing formal variation and its connection to disability—is contingent on an anti-ableist “perspective of the disabled,” though Quayson may be trying to say that a reading that doesn’t have disability on its radar might miss the connection between disability and the “structural devices” that by his account nervously irrupt around disability representations. My readings respond to Quayson’s suggestion that we shift away from understanding disability representation as the stubborn intrusion of imaginatively-limited social understandings of disability into the literary field, instead understanding disability representation as complex *processes* of situating disability in representational structures as a set of material conditions.³⁶ But I am wary of how Quayson repeats what seems to be an axiomatic assumption in literary disability studies: that disability can only exist in literature as an extraordinary origin,³⁷ a hermeneutic

³⁴ Ibid., 26–27.

³⁵ Ibid., 19. In my final chapter, I do read Ware’s text as consciously alluding to ableist interpretations of his protagonist’s body, only to deny them any actual grounding in the narration of the text.

³⁶ That is, bodily, mental and behavioral configurations, interfaces with built and social space, and economic considerations. Ibid., 24.

³⁷ Garland Thomson, Snyder and Mitchell, and Quayson all speak of disability as something (a problem) that inaugurates narrative.

lightning rod, or a crisis. Snyder and Mitchell imagine disability representation as deflating the whole literary endeavor, causing it to stumble and “close down,” and Quayson imagines it with the language of the short-circuit, something that crackles and shocks, a power surge that unsettles a text’s dominant representational protocols.

In the chapters that follow, I track particular, disability-related itineraries through what Puar calls “the relations of force, connection, resonance, and patterning”—the assemblages—of each novel’s aesthetic world. Each chapter moves slowly and builds an account of how meaning accretes across images or circumstances in which disability embodiment, racial identity, ableism, and racism appear, materializing various meanings for race and disability in the world-making narrations of these novels. Each text finds and explores an object named by disability, and does so in a scene organized by multiple racial narratives: disability and race are put into relation to one another via metaphor; as a relationship of cause and effect; one as reprieve from another; or as prompting analogous visual events. Puar writes that assemblage can describe how disability and race do not have coherent, fixed meanings: “concepts do not prescribe relations, nor do they exist prior to them; rather, relations of force, connection, resonance, and patterning give rise to concepts.”³⁸ Though many of the disability and racial projects mobilized by these novels’ narratives are familiar, they are put into various combinations with one another. And as each of these texts represent American ordinaries in which meanings for racialized bodies circulate, disabled embodiment is represented as shaping a particular perceptual or material encounter with the world of the novel.

Chapter One, “The Lower Frequencies: Cripistemologies of Race in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*,” attends to how Ellison’s novel moves beyond its initial, titular equation of blindness with racist misrecognition. The scholarship surrounding Ellison’s influential contribution to the American

³⁸ Puar, “I Would Rather,” 58.

literary canon presumes a simple equation of blindness and deeply flawed, racist knowing, without pausing over how blindness as a lived experience inflects the meaning it produces as a metaphorical vehicle. Multiple instances of blindness, operating on more than one level of signification, produce a set of meanings for blindness that extend beyond the novel's initial metaphor. Nonsightedness is sometimes a way of operating associated with intense experiences of belonging, it's a predicate of the oppressed as well as the oppressor, a metaphor for the problem of race in midcentury America *and* a mode for operating and making a life under such conditions. This chapter gives an account—one that is as yet still missing in the literature on Ellison's novel—of how blindness is not just the absence of vision or a deeply flawed vision, but also a disabled, crip way of moving through the world and accessing knowledge. For an epistemological project centered on how to discern “what is really happening when your eyes were looking through,” nonsightedness also functions in *Invisible Man* as a tactic for racial politics, a way of operating and accessing reality. I understand the novel's conceptual work to be a *cripistemology*—a disabled way of knowing that makes the narrator's experience accessible to his interlocutors, if they are “blind”; a critique of the masterful, normate access to knowledge so long aligned with vision; a mode of making do and making a life in the ordinary as a black man. As this chapter traces and explicates a system of connections, it focuses on three scenes: the prologue and epilogue framing narrative, the invisible man's speech at a rally, and a scene in which Brother Jack, the white leader of a socialist organization, becomes visible as a partially blind man when his false eye pops out of its socket.

Chapter Two, “The Time is Out of Joint: Deafness and Injury in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*,” takes up another canonical novel that explicitly engages American racism by dramatizing the historical Margaret Garner case, in which a woman escaped from slavery and committed infanticide under the threat of being remanded to her owner as property. *Beloved* imagines Margaret Garner as a woman named Sethe who is living in a house haunted by her murdered daughter, whose sons have

run away and who is living with her other daughter, Denver. As the novel begins, a man from the plantation where she was enslaved arrives in her yard, followed soon after by her murdered daughter as a fully-grown, embodied ghost. *Beloved* has prompted sustained critical attention to its account of survival, memory, history, and trauma. But less recognized in the critical literature is how *Beloved* is full of disability; most commonly, disability that is acquired from injury under slavery.

Beloved, the revenant, is described as having a non-normative embodiment, as is her sister Denver, who suddenly goes deaf for two years and then suddenly regains her hearing at the sound of the baby ghost going up the stairs of their house. Denver's deafness is narrated in small, scattered passages, but if we consider them together, we find that there's more there than strange supernatural disturbances. What's more, it becomes clear that Denver's deafness extends beyond Denver, individually, instead expressing an injury, acquired and there all along, to the family structure. The narrative narrates Denver's deafness as an embodiment that inaugurates particular, non-normative modes of sensation and attention that give her greater contact with the spirit world and her missing father. This chapter tracks how Denver inhabits her particular embodiment and its attunements in the face of such injury across distinct phases: a period of withdrawal and self-sustenance that begins with her deafness and lasts until *Beloved* appears as a revenant; one of hypervigilant attention to *Beloved*'s presence, waiting to be beheld; and one of waiting *on* her mother and sister, giving life in ways that resonate with her inheritance—a deafness-enabled communion with her lost father and her dead grandmother.

In narrating Denver's disability and her shifting modes of being-with specters and being with her family's injury, *Beloved*'s account of Denver's deafness makes a distinction between the harm of injury and its effects. Injury is violence, something we do not want in our futures; and it has effects—disability, embodied and mental variation. *Beloved* represents its impacted bodies as not themselves mutually exclusive with a desirable future, and in fact, as we see with Denver, they can

enable particular arts of living. The nature of the shifts in Denver's embodiment—written as they are as less-than-simple instances of loss—encourages an understanding of disability and injury under slavery as trans-ability. That is, it refuses a sense of wholeness before a particular injury and imagines injury's attendant disability as a transformation rather than only debility. It depicts a way of life at base injured and continuing on in non-normative ways, a way of life that further injury changes again.

Chapter Three, “Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*, Care, and Racialized Misfitting,” starts by tracking *American Psycho* in terms of its resonances with Ellison's novel, *Invisible Man*. *American Psycho* transposes the invisible man's message about the “lessons of [his] life” as a black man onto a white Wall Street financier, Patrick Bateman, who is a serial killer. Both texts raise a question about madness and response, though the stakes of responding or not responding are less clear for *American Psycho*, in which a white professional experiences mental distress and compulsions to violence than in a text that is explicitly working through the problem of American racism. Highlighting a hermeneutic cruelty at the heart of much of the novel's reception history, I push off of Michael Clark's argument about moments where Patrick tries to confess his crimes to his yuppie peers, but receives no response. Clark argues that these moments dramatize the reader's ethical response-ability as an alternative to an untenable assent to Patrick's actions and condemnation's “smug moralistic occlusion of any responsibility for the violence.”³⁹ Beyond even murder that goes unpunished, the form of the novel foregrounds its project of challenging readers' ability to sustain an engagement: the narration takes on incredible levels of fatiguing, minute detail about electronics, designer apparel,

³⁹ Michael P. Clark, “Violence, Ethics, and the Rhetoric of Decorum in *American Psycho*,” in *Bret Easton Ellis: American Psycho, Glamorama, Lunar Park*, ed. Naomi Mandel (New York: Continuum, 2011), 35.

and fine cuisine that Patrick conspicuously consumes, but also about the violent acts of torture, rape, and murder that he commits.

In response to the challenge the book sets, this chapter tracks what the narrative says about Patrick's experience in order to notice how madness and murder is figured not as an intensification of Patrick's status as a white, consummate consumer, but as a kind of reprieve from his experience of whiteness. Patrick confesses that his greatest desire is "fit[ting] in," and diligently cultivates his own belonging to the white, male, heterosexual, able-bodied norm of abstract personhood. He asserts his madness as confession or threat when his approximation of the norm makes him show up as an ineffectual "boy next door," or when, because he and other white male Wall Street types are functionally interchangeable, he is experiencing the mental distress of an existential meaninglessness.

Patrick's confessions of murder, as a number of critics have shown, do not result in any sort of misfitting with his peers. This chapter tracks the handful of scenes that take place outside of Patrick's usual yuppie circles, in which the novel stages scenes of recognition and response from an immigrant taxi driver, Chinese dry cleaners, and the proprietors of a kosher deli. These readings rely on Margaret Price's account of care in a scene of mental misfitting to notice these scenes' dynamics of response and engagement, and argue that alongside a breakdown in communication, two of these scenes offer an outside to Patrick's white interchangeability: his actions are recognized as significant and he is held to a scene of misfitting in ways that demand an account (and presume its possibility). In the face of this arrest and dissent, Patrick defects, breaking from any ethical engagement via racial insult or by leaving the scene. But Patrick attempts to return to particular experiences of misfit when he is experiencing extreme mental distress. However, recognition is not narrated as something Patrick can successfully order up, as with a new stereo system: his attempt to return to a scene of care fails in one instance, and his attempt to return to a scene of identification with someone he has harmed is arrested and denied by the scene of care he experiences at the kosher deli.

Chapter Four, “The Graphic Ordinary: Composing Visual Experiences of Disability and Race in Chris Ware’s *Building Stories*,” explicates Chris Ware’s careful attention to form and the potentialities of the comics medium in order to recognize how *Building Stories* pushes against the grain of conventional ways of visual knowing that attribute eventfulness to disabled and nonwhite bodies. Through compositional choices and directly thematized scenes of looking, *Building Stories*’ form interrupts processes of visual reading (iconography) in order to push readers into experiences of defamiliarized looking. *Building Stories*, I argue, is fundamentally concerned with the aesthetic problem of representing putatively extraordinary embodiment in ways that break from conventional perception, doing philosophical work on representation, visual experience, and the ways bodies appear. I argue that *Building Stories* accomplishes this interruption of conventional seeing by composing a set of relations between varying appearances for race and disability; and it foregrounds what Wittgenstein would call visual experiences, experiences of changing seeings-as for disability and race. As I explicate how *Building Stories* makes perceptual practices perceptible, I focus on four narrative and compositional strategies for rendering disability and race ordinary. First, as disabled and black bodies are materialized across multiple panels, they are compositionally and narratively de-dramatized. Second, I read how dominant understandings of disability as something that precludes sexual desirability is raised in the textual register two particular narratives, but undercut by the silent, visual narration; likewise, another disability narrative is suggested and undone by readers’ layered encounter with a complex page layout that produces an at-a-glance visual experience in addition to the narrative experience of reading through each of the panels. Third, I turn to scenes where Ware’s text calls attention to disabled and racial figures’ status as images that elicit dominant visual experiences of seeing a person *as* a disabled person or *as* a black person, one in which the protagonist ruminates over a woman’s shock in seeing her leg on public transit and one in which a police sketch of a black man reads as a racial caricature when juxtaposed with his mug shot in the

panels' drawings. These narratives both work to complicate the referential power of these depicted visual experiences of disability and race. Finally, I read how *Building Stories* recalibrates what's seen-as disability and what's seen-as race via visual resonances that complicate the usual family resemblances between bodies.

CHAPTER ONE, The Lower Frequencies: Cripistemologies of Race in Ralph Ellison's

Invisible Man

[Fiction operates] by a subtle process of negating the world of things as given in favor of a complex of man-made positives.
(Ralph Ellison, "Introduction")

Being invisible and without substance, a disembodied voice, as it were, what else could I do? What else but try to tell you what was really happening when your eyes were looking through? And it is this which frightens me:

Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?
(Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 581)

As a work of fiction, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) makes an aesthetic world that exists in an allorealistic relationship to the United States at the midcentury.⁴⁰ The drama that unfolds across its chapters is the story of a black man trying to make a home in an American ordinary that—as he must learn again and again, more and more fully (it's a bitter pill to swallow)—is deeply organized by racist ideology and its material effects.⁴¹ As Ben Highmore has helpfully pointed out, the everyday and the ordinary "signif[y] ambivalently." For the purposes of this chapter, the ordinary names the familiar settings, people, and patterns of day to day life, "the landscape closest to us, the world most

⁴⁰ "Allorealism" is a term inspired by scholarship on counterfactual history, or allohistory: it's helpful for talking through how the realist aesthetic world is not a transparent or mere copy of the world, and for talking through how realist aesthetic worlds, for all their technical independence, must also be filled with scenes, interactions, and figures that are recognizable as actually or plausibly belonging to *the* world to have any pedagogical or imagination-enriching power. See especially Martin Bunzl, "Counterfactual History: A User's Guide," *The American Historical Review* 109.3 (June 2004): 845–858.

⁴¹ In *Ordinary Affects*, Kathleen Stewart undertakes an ethnography of the ordinary as "a shifting assemblage of practices and practical knowledges" and ordinary affects as "the varied, surging capacities to affect and to be affected that give everyday life the quality of a continual motion of relations, scenes, contingencies, and emergences." This chapter reads the invisible man's narrative as building an account of American racism as it [comes] "into view as a scene of immanent force," as opposed to writing racism, racist ideology, and anti-racist tactics as reducible to "a totalized system, of which everything is always already somehow a part." Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 1.

immediately met.”⁴² In his introduction to the text, Ellison explains that the story started as a war novel about the existential torture of an African American fighter pilot caught up in “an archetypal American dilemma: How could you treat a Negro as equal in war and then deny him equality during times of peace?”⁴³ And *Invisible Man* took shape around the voice tinged with “echoes of blues-toned laughter” that came to Ellison as he moved through New York City and mulled over this basic injustice,⁴⁴ along with “the persistence of racial violence and the unavailability of legal protection”(xv).

The “disembodied voice that became the narrator of *Invisible Man* enters onto the scene with the intonation, “I am an invisible man.”⁴⁵ As his self-definition unfolds, it becomes clear that invisibility is a way to describe the condition of being black in America at the midcentury. He writes, “I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me.[...] That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their *inner* eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality”(3, emphasis original). The title and the first lines figure blackness, an identity that has historically been marked and patrolled so visually, as invisible, and are the first indications that the novel is engaged in a project of stretching conventional sense making with

⁴² Ben Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 1. Ordinary can also mean routine, dull, or unnoticeable; that’s not the primary sense I’m working with here, but on the other hand, the invisible man’s entire project is about waking up to racialized realities that are difficult to perceive because they are so familiar.

⁴³ Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*. New York: Random House, 1952. Reprinted with an introduction by the author. New York: Vintage, 1995, xiii. Citations refer to the 1995 edition.

⁴⁴ The basic injustice being, again, that in order “to fulfill his duty as a citizen it was often necessary that [the African American] fight for his self-affirmed right to fight”(xii).

⁴⁵ This echo with Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground*, which starts “I am a sick man” is reinforced by the resonance between Dostoevsky’s “Author’s Note” and the invisible man’s statement that “I am no freak of nature, nor of history. I was in the cards, other things having been equal (or unequal) eight-five years ago”(15). The “Author’s Note” says that though the story is fictional, “it is clear that such persons as the writer of these notes not only may, but positively must, exist in our society, when we consider the circumstances in the midst of which our society is formed.”

respect to identity. As the narrator expresses racialized belonging as invisibility, he's riffing on Dostoevsky's underground man ("I am a sick man..."), a riff he circles back to when he speaks about the ways he's tried to conduct his day to day life in the epilogue: "I carried my sickness and though for a long time I tried to place it in the outside world, the attempt to write it down shows me that at least half of it lay within me." Of this complicity, he writes, "*That* is the real soul-sickness"(575). The first line, then, inaugurates a being and a metaphor, and it's a metaphor that the prologue first elaborates as a disability metaphor couched in an allusion to *Notes from Underground* that expresses racialized ordinariness as producing debility.⁴⁶ To be black in America is to be invisible, the object of others' blindness; living one's life under this condition is "wearing on the nerves," and makes one ill.

The literature since *Invisible Man's* publication has understood invisibility as part of a blindness metaphor that expresses the problem of America's racist misrecognition of its black citizens, and how that misrecognition inflects black Americans' own self-knowledge. Here, blindness stands in for "the racializing gaze," pathological social relations⁴⁷; it stands in for racist knowing as deficient, pathological knowing. And by extension, racist knowing threatens America: if racism makes us blind on a person to person level, then on a broader scale, this blindness metaphor argues that our nation's racist underpinnings⁴⁸ threaten the body politic, making it unwhole and pathological. The power of the metaphor derives from comparing racism to disability as understood

⁴⁶ Jasbir Puar has suggested thinking not in terms of fixed identity categories like disability but rather thinking about *debility* as a modality; I use debility here instead of illness intentionally. While illness and disability are social formations with much in common, they are importantly distinct on certain points (illness could have and should have a cure, while disability oppression has long taken a medicalized, rehabilitative logic: valuable life is suspended until a cure or normate embodiment is achieved, forced normalizing rehabilitation, etc.). See "The Cost of Getting Better: Suicide, Sensation, Switchpoints," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 18, no. 1 (2012): 149–158.

⁴⁷ Paul Allen Anderson, "Ralph Ellison's Music Lessons," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Ellison*, ed. Ross Posnock (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 85.

⁴⁸ Built as it is on the exploitation of racialized bodies.

by the medical and moral models: as corporeal brokenness, divine punishment, individual tragedy, a life less-worth-living.

Ellison's central blindness metaphor is more or less taken at this face value by critical work on *Invisible Man*. Critics of *Invisible Man* derive their understanding of the novel's central metaphor from the first paragraphs' "inner eyes" articulation of invisibility. It seems a simple enough metaphor: the narrator is invisible as the object of the racializing gaze and the problem lies with those who find him invisible. They "refuse" to see, they see only his surroundings or the figments of their own imagination; and their non-sightedness is figurative, having to do with their "inner eyes," not their physical eyes. And so, of course, these passages have prompted decades of Ellison criticism to understand invisibility as a metaphor that by extension equates racism and social nonrecognition with blindness, which more generally stands in for ignorance and deeply flawed knowing. Anne Cheng, for example, understands the prologue as a series of elaborations on "the nature of racial blindness."⁴⁹ In a similar vein, Shelley Eversley articulates her interpretive premises by noting that "metaphorically, light represents knowledge, or mental illumination," and she writes of "the absence of light, the dark benighted thinking" that produces invisibility as "epistemological blindness to full humanity" and "metaphorical myopia."⁵⁰ The scholarship surrounding Ellison's influential contribution to the American literary canon holds that disability lies at the heart of *Invisible Man's* central metaphor. But in general, they presume a simple equation of blindness and deeply

⁴⁹ Anne Anlin Cheng, "Ralph Ellison and the Politics of Melancholia," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Ellison*, ed. Ross Posnock (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 121. Cheng's article goes on to argue that in racially charged exchanges, "invisibility rarely presents a one-sided projection" and that "mutual invisibility as the result of mutual projection seems unavoidable"(122). While Cheng's sense of how the dynamic works is more mobile and bi-directional than most, invisibility names a figurative condition that is born of a figurative blindness, one that equates blindness with racism and nonrecognition.

⁵⁰ Shelley Eversley, "Female Iconography in *Invisible Man*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Ellison*, ed. Ross Posnock (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 175–176.

flawed knowing, without pausing over how blindness as a lived experience inflects the meaning it produces as a metaphorical vehicle—and, in this text, as a kind of embodiment, a mode of knowing and operating.⁵¹

From its inception, disability studies has critiqued the way in which disability is rarely—almost never—present in cultural representation "in terms of its own significance," as a lived experience or way of navigating the world. Many scholars have also critiqued the prevalence of disability metaphors that equate bodily variation with corruption, evil, ignorance, disorder, collapse, and so on.⁵² David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder write:

Our thesis centers not simply on the fact that people with disabilities have been the object of representational treatments, but rather that their function in literary discourse is primarily twofold: disability pervades literary narrative, first, as a stock feature of characterization and, second, as an opportunistic metaphorical device. We term this perpetual discursive dependency upon disability *narrative prosthesis*.⁵³

In the first paragraphs of *Invisible Man*, as the narrator begins to explain invisibility, blindness is indeed used as metaphorical device to mark racialized understanding and racist looking as deeply flawed and pathological, with little thought to blindness as an experience of the world. But critics skip over blindness's representation in *Invisible Man* too quickly when they repeat this metaphor exclusively according to the logic that appears in the initial paragraph. As they examine the

⁵¹ This presumption is an effect of ableism: blindness as mere lack of vision, added to the longstanding equation of vision and knowledge, results in such a reading. See Martin Jay's *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) for a helpful account of this metaphor. Indeed this quick understanding of what it means for the central metaphor to be linked to a figurative blindness also makes it difficult to consider the scenes involving actually blind characters in anything but figurative terms.

⁵² By David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder's influential account, disability can function as a stock feature of characterization (marking distinction or uniqueness); it can drive narrative structure as a conflict, while its eradication through cure or death provides narrative resolution; or it can materialize the evil, pathos, and brokenness that are its usual metaphorical equivalents. See David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000.

⁵³ Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 47.

mechanisms and particularities of the racializing gaze and white scopophilia, blindness is reified as a failure of knowledge and social encounter.

Through close reading, we can recognize how the invisible man's project—of making a home, of belonging to the ordinary, of self-understanding—is a project that figures blindness much more variously than has been recognized. The oratory of the disembodied voice builds a set of meanings for invisibility and blindness that starts from “the construction of their *inner* eyes” that makes the protagonist invisible, and gathers through scenes in which other figurative blindnesses, literal non-sightedness, and non-visual narrative modes take the fore. The metaphor's tenor (an American ordinariness conditioned by racism) is carried by a vehicle⁵⁴ (blindness) whose meaning, in the world the novel makes, isn't limited to racial ignorance and incomplete, deeply flawed, and unjust knowing. Multiple instances of blindness, operating on more than one level of signification, work on each other, producing a surface of warping and wending emergences of meaning. Nonsightedness is sometimes a way of operating imbued with intense experiences of belonging, it's a predicate of the oppressed as well as the oppressor, a metaphor for the problem of race in America *and* the mode for operating and making a life.

Invisible Man is an intensely visual book—recent essays have considered the novel's exhibition spaces and portraiture; feminine spectacles; the novel's references to photography and the camera as an apparatus of vision; the presence of the social sciences' gaze; visuality and black masculinity; vision as an ethical relationship; and so on.⁵⁵ In moving beyond the novel's titular,

⁵⁴ “Tenor” and “vehicle” are terms for the parts of a metaphor suggested by I.A. Richards (1936), and roughly correspond to the primary subject and secondary subject of Beardsley's terminology.

⁵⁵ See Lena M. Hill, “The Visual Art of *Invisible Man*: Ellison's Portrait of Blackness,” *American Literature* 81, no. 4 (2009): 775–803; Eversley, “Female Iconography”; Sara Blair, *Harlem Crossroads: Black Writers and the Photograph in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Kimberly Lamm, “Visuality and Black Masculinity in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Romare Bearden's Photomontages,” *Callaloo* 26, no. 3 (Summer 2003): 813–835; and Hsuan Hsu, “Regarding

metaphorical invocation of not-seeing to consider moments where visibility evaporates and where nonsightedness becomes a way of operating, I hope to contribute to the body of scholarship on visibility and *Invisible Man*. This chapter gives an account of how blindness is not just the absence of vision or a deeply flawed vision, but also a disabled, crip way of moving through the world and accessing knowledge. For an epistemological project centered on how to discern “what is really happening when your eyes were looking through,” and how to make do in the context of American racism, a blindness metaphor may articulate the problem of American racism, but I argue that nonsightedness also functions in *Invisible Man* as a tactic, a way of operating and accessing reality. I understand the novel’s conceptual work to be a *cripistemology*—a disabled way of knowing that makes the narrator’s experience accessible to his interlocutors, if they are “blind”; a critique of the masterful, normate access to knowledge so long aligned with vision; a mode of making do and making a life in the ordinary as a black man.

In considering how blindness more variously animates Ellison’s text, this study responds directly to Chris Bell’s critique of White Disability Studies. As a graduate student at UIC a decade ago, Chris Bell wrote,

it is disingenuous to keep up the pretense that the field is an inclusive one when it is not. On that score, I would like to concede the failure of Disability Studies to engage issues of race and ethnicity in a substantive capacity, thereby entrenching whiteness as its constitutive underpinning.⁵⁶

Since Bell’s essay, many other disability scholars have critiqued critical approaches that cordon disability off as an experience and identity distinct from race, arguing that disability thus understood is always implicitly white, and they have begun consolidating a critical mass of scholarly projects at

Mimicry: Race and Visual Ethics in *Invisible Man*,” *Arizona Quarterly* 59, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 107–140.

⁵⁶ Chris Bell, “Introducing White Disability Studies: A Modest Proposal,” in *The Disability Studies Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Lennard J. Davis (New York: Routledge, 2006), 275.

the intersection of race and disability.⁵⁷ But none have responded to one of Bell's specific entreaties—to engage in a sustained way with *Invisible Man*.⁵⁸ In the style of a “Modest Proposal,” Bell's essay advises his readers about how to ensure the continuation of White Disability Studies, warning that the field mustn't “discuss those texts rife with possibilities insofar as parsing out intersections between disability, race, and ethnicity,” including *Invisible Man*. Bell explains the novel's possibilities, and again, satirically advises the field to continue ignoring the text:

The first lines of Ellison's text speak to the difficulty of black ontology in the United States. Ellison's protagonist, of course, is not speaking of a literal invisibility so much as he is drawing light to how it is that others (read: whites with hegemonic power) choose not to see him in totality. If this characterization does not seem applicable to Disability Studies—wherein the racialized subaltern is remembered and considered solely as a matter of convenience more often than not—I don't know what would be. Yet it would be foolish to illuminate this text's applicability to Disability Studies, or, furthermore, to consider the prophetic final lines of the novel—“who know[sic] but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?”(581)—wherein the protagonist considers the complexities of representing and/or embodying communal univocality. I do not recommend examining this.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ See, for example, Nirmala Erevelles and Andrea Minear, Mel Chen, Jennifer James, Josh Lukin, Anna Mollow, Ellen Samuels, and Cindy Wu. Rosemarie Garland Thomson's *Extraordinary Bodies* includes a consideration of black nationalist woman writers' depictions of disability figures, often powerful black disabled woman characters. This body of work has established, for example, how blackness has historically been demarcated by medical discourses, and how disability has been used as the justification for slavery and segregation, with lasting effects; they've explored acquired disability/debility as produced by capitalism and experienced disproportionately by people of color (this understates but includes debility under slavery and Jim Crow violence); particularities disability oppression at the intersections of disability and race in educational institutions, the prison system, and law enforcement (disabled black men operate at a drastic disadvantage, and there are troubling patterns of police violence against Autistic people, people with intellectual disabilities, and Deaf people).

⁵⁸ In “Black Man, Blind Man,” an article about performance artist and poet Lynn Manning, Carrie Sandahl does mention *Invisible Man* in passing: “Like Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Manning's personhood is invisible to the whites who encounter him—invisible not because he is an apparition but because his black skin makes him invisible to the whites' ‘inner eye’”(587). Ato Quayson also briefly reads the disclosure of Brother Jack's disability as an “epiphanic use of disability” in fiction, saying that its sudden emergence in a scene of ethical debate functions as a sort of “discursive punctuation mark”(44). In my estimation, this reading amounts to saying that disability is used as a device to mark and give emphasis to ethical crossroads, as a kind of shock factor or distinction that has little to do with the experience of blindness itself. I'm interested in tracking all of the meanings generated by (metaphorical, often) relationships within a scene, and also in seeing what happens if we take figuration literally.

⁵⁹ Bell, “Introducing White Disability Studies,” 280.

Bell emphasizes, here, a sense of Ellison's central metaphor as *purely figurative*,⁶⁰ and sees the novel's promise for disability studies as a meditation on "the complexities" of speaking for a potentially capacious group of those misrecognized by—or recognized at the whims of—those in power. But as he suggests that disability operates like race and ethnicity, Bell's exploratory stab still understands not-seeing in a way that echoes Ellison scholarship's presumed understandings of invisibility and blindness, dominated as they are by the inner-eyes articulation in the second paragraph of the prologue.⁶¹

Ellison's novel, as I hope will become clear, experiments with blindness on the level of figurative language, plot, and narration. Because of the novel's novel deployments of non-sightedness, this is also a chapter about what happens when two terms don't remain in a neat, stable, fixed relation to one another (*racism is blindness*). As is often noted, metaphor's Greek root means "to carry across" (*metapherein*). Jay Dolmage has argued that

What we might focus on here is not the carrying itself but the need for it. *Meaning* itself can be metaphorized as immobile, "crippled," delayed, in need of assistance. As such, metaphor should be seen as the space within language where the breakdown of meaning is addressed not with correction or seamless substitution, but with something else: where the holes in language are plugged with squares and triangles.⁶²

⁶⁰ The passing engagements with *Invisible Man* in disability studies scholarship maintain this purely figurative sense of the central metaphor (that is, this sense of the metaphor as having absolutely nothing to do with questions of seeing or not seeing), I suspect in order to distance themselves from the ways in which aligning blindness with the racializing gaze is an instance of a problematic narrative prosthesis, where blindness is used to stand in for a pathological sociality.

⁶¹ One of black disability studies' most crucial interventions has been to call out thinking that has trouble conceptualizing persons at the intersections of race, ethnicity, and disability. While Bell writes about the racialized power relations of *Invisible Man* as analogous to ableist power relations, he's not necessarily saying that disabled subjects are one thing and racialized ones another. His account does not necessarily assume that disabled subalterns and racialized subalterns are distinct groups.

⁶² Jay Timothy Dolmage, *Disability Rhetoric* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2014), 103.

Invisible Man is a novel that starts from the thicket of cultural expressions, historical lineages, family stories, physical and psychic injuries, illusions and dis-illusionments of living as a black man in America and the poverty of language to express it. In using invisibility and its correlate, figurative blindness, to try to carry over some of that meaning, Ellison's text seems even to find an expressive limit there, drops off the blindness metaphor and picks it up again in a different scene with a different set of terms: blindness is vulnerability, for example. Or it takes the term that one metaphor understands shallowly as ignorance and imagines a world and life-way, animating the text and all the blindnesses in it. Otherwise stated, this chapter takes up the task of tracking how blindness is put into metaphorical relation to blackness as a primary subject, and how it, as the secondary subject (blindness) adds predicates to blackness but itself gathers predicates across scenes, that is, makes meaning as an arrangement of specific connections between concepts.⁶³ In tracking *Invisible Man*'s blindness metaphors, and in tracking how nonsightedness is mobilized as a narrative mode and as event on the level of plot, we can recognize how the novel does not crystallize a particular, medicalized understanding of disability, giving blindness a content to be judged. Rather, our analysis focuses on what arrangements of nonsightedness concepts (metaphors), experiences, and encounters with a world can *do* for an anti-racist politics.⁶⁴

As this chapter traces and explicates a system of connections, it focuses on three primary scenes: the prologue and epilogue framing narrative, the invisible man's speech at a rally, and the

⁶³ I borrow this language from John Philips's explication of assemblage, which highlights its meaning in the original French as *agencement*: arrangement, connections in a design. See "Agencement/Assemblage," *Theory, Culture & Society* 23, no. 2–3 (2006): 108–109.

⁶⁴ Quoting Elizabeth Grosz, Jasbir Puar emphasizes the potential in shifting from the content or essence of categories like disability, race, gender, or their intersection (women of color) in order to focus on how meaning is made by particular arrangements of concepts: Grosz writes that intersectionality is "a gridlock model that fails to account for the mutual constitution and indeterminacy of embodied configurations of gender, sexuality, race, class, and nation." Jasbir Puar, "I Would Rather Be a Cyborg than a Goddess: Becoming-Intersectional in Assemblage Theory," *philoSOPHIA* 2, no. 1 (2012): 56.

disclosure of Brother Jack's false eye. *Invisible Man* is interested in access to knowledge in this midcentury American social/cultural matrix, and that its recollections and reflections represent an American philosophy that is working to discern the realities of a racialized ordinary, building blindness into the tissue of the aesthetic world from the first metaphor. As the prologue and the epilogue articulate the invisible man's insights, however, the narrative "goes blind," operating in haptic and auditory modes. Again, in the narrator's first official speech for the Brotherhood, he uses a different, extended blindness metaphor about "a nation of one-eyed mice" to describe dispossession, which includes but is not limited to blackness. At the same time, the experience of giving the speech is one of going blind in the bright lights of the auditorium, an experience of nonsightedness, being at home, and being human that exists in contrast to the anxious scenes that frame it. This cluster of scenes uses blindness to express a problem, but they also use nonsightedness as a mode of making do, something like a provisional solution when a cure is not available. I also analyze the famous scene where Brother Jack becomes visible as a one-eyed man, the invisible man's extreme response, and the shifts in how Jack attaches his blindness to different metaphorical vehicles in two different versions of attempted connection with the protagonist. These scenes, taken together, set up an initial metaphor (the condition of living in a racist ordinary is one of being blind, not just encountering white blindness) and proceed through an itinerary of proliferating presences of and meanings for nonsightedness.

Prologue and Epilogue: Cripistemologies of Race

As I take up Bell's call to examine *Invisible Man*'s "applicability to Disability Studies," I want to underline the "understand" of Ellison's line ("I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me"[3]). While *Invisible Man* is well-described as treating "the difficulty of black ontology in the United States," I argue that it is much more concerned with epistemology. Ellison's prologue and epilogue describe a manifold project of self-definition, discerning reality ("belatedly

study[ing] the lessons of my life”), and making a home. And as the prologue joins the epilogue to frame the bildungsroman episodes of the novel, its narration plays with the senses, using descriptive modes that favor auditory and haptic information, or lapse into the sense-distorting imaginative inwardness of the hashish dream. Thus, the epistemological project that *Invisible Man* inaugurates, of striving for greater access to “what is really happening,” is in important ways a disabled way of knowing and a disabled way of operating, a cripistemology.⁶⁵

"I am an invisible man": the first lines of *Invisible Man* break a silence and begin a process of access to an as yet unknown being. While the medium is, of course, visual (black letters on a white page), this beginning asks us to orient ourselves to the task of beholding a man defined as someone we can't see. And so we listen—with no small reward. As many critics have noted, Ellison's prose is extremely musical. The next line, for instance, splits neatly into two octosyllabic phrases bookended by long-O sounds: "No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe." Later in the novel, the narrator tells us that he's an orator, and the epilogue articulates the narrative that we've been getting all along as the product of “a disembodied voice”(581). So with these auditory self-descriptions, the narrative and narration give us another provocative sensory bend. Lennard Davis has pointed out that a novel's text operates silently, in what he terms “a deafened modality.”⁶⁶ From its first line, then, *Invisible Man's* text plays with an awareness of the non-visual senses as different modes of epistemological access to reality. As the prologue and epilogue set down the terms of the

⁶⁵ As I elaborate further below, *cripistemology* is a term that was coined by Merri Lisa Johnson in the context of an ongoing conversation with Robert McRuer. What it might mean was the provocation for a conference at New York University in Spring 2013 and for two special issues of *The Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*, but the term's combination of *crip* and *epistemology* is about “knowing and unknowing disability, making and unmaking disability epistemologies, and the importance of challenging subjects who confidently ‘know’ about ‘disability’ as though it could be a thoroughly comprehended object of knowledge.” Merri Lisa Johnson and Robert McRuer, “Introduction,” *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* 8, no. 2 (2014): 130.

⁶⁶ Lennard Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (New York: Verso, 1995), 4.

invisible man's project, his narration plays out in a visual medium that cannot see (text operates, after all, ekphrastically), and in a silent, deafened medium that transmits a voice written as sound.

As the invisible man continues to hone in on a self-definition, the prologue's narrative continues in a distinctively nonsighted mode, as information about touch is added to the textual representation of an oration. He says: "I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind," describing his form and texture (smooth, sinewy, wet, hard). These lines not only give us epistemological access to an interlocutor's being, but they also mark themselves as the unique access points to an aesthetic world, asking us to rely on the words on the page for what we know, rather than the dominant understandings that produce invisibility in the first place. Indeed, the second line proceeds by swatting down the likely ways a reader might fill in the blanks and make sense of the first line's claim that the narrator is invisible ("No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms"[3]).

From these haptic, auditory, non-sighted epistemological access points, the prologue shifts to an attempt to describe and explain invisibility not as feature of the invisible man's body, but as a social condition in which dominant understandings, but also visual knowledge, fail. The protagonist explains: "I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me." These lines contribute to the conventional understanding of invisibility as a function of figurative blindness, the racializing gaze. Already, though, the metaphor is layered with a slightly different figuration: in the simile that intervenes between the invisible man's explanation of others' refusal to see and its etiology in the

“construction of their inner eyes,” he is figured as a gaffed freak.⁶⁷ In this version of the explanation, racism is not metaphorically figured as a blind person looking at a man that she is unable to see. Rather, racist ideology becomes a set of perceptual surfaces that erase a person’s presence. In this version, the spectacle and the spectator (don’t) see the same thing. Here we begin to see how Ellison’s central blindness metaphor is actually multiple and on the move: rather than merely repeating blindness as a figure for racial misrecognition, this image depicts invisibility as a location in the world that, because of how it’s structured, makes the erasure happen. So even though it’s about not being seen, in this simile, no one—or everyone—is blind. Again, I’m arguing that if we resist the temptation to run with the metaphorical equation of blindness with racism that is proposed in the first paragraphs of the prologue, we will begin to notice that *Invisible Man* grounds that metaphor in an aesthetic world where blindness has other presences, too—at times, metaphors morph, or metaphor deepens into allegory that shifts the relations of analogy; at others or simultaneously, the narrative itself goes blind, muting visual descriptions.

As they present the invisible man as a voice and a form, questioning received, visually-inflected modes of knowing, the prologue and the epilogue defect from the traditional alliance between knowledge and vision as disability is used to *tâtonne*,⁶⁸ or feel out, the problem that the

⁶⁷ Robert Bogdan, following workers’ distinctions, distinguishes between born freaks (disabled people with anomalous embodiments), made freaks (for example, tattooed ladies), and gaffed freaks. Gaffed freaks were not actually anomalously embodied, but with optical illusions or special sets made themselves appear to be. For example, an “armless wonder” whose arms are tucked into a tight-fitting shirt is a gaffed freak. See *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

⁶⁸ This may be an unfamiliar word to readers of English, but it’s particularly apt: *tâtonner* is a French verb defined in LaRousse as “Chercher à se diriger ou à trouver quelque chose sans voir, en tâtant pour reconnaître l’environnement : Avancer dans le noir en tâtonnant. [ou] Procéder empiriquement, par essais successifs, pour obtenir le résultat voulu.” [To attempt to direct oneself or to find something without seeing, tapping in order to recognize one’s environs: Advance in the dark en tâtonnant (an example) or To proceed empirically, by successive attempts, in order to obtain the desired result.] It’s a verb for the gestural activity of feeling the outlines of something with one’s hands or with a white cane, which I’ve translated loosely as “feeling out.” It also marks a certain

narrator has continually bumped into as he makes his way in the world as a young man. The prologue and epilogue also work to frame the entire book as an attempt to negotiate the problem of making a home in an American ordinary, one that's failed to deliver on the promises of 85 years prior.⁶⁹ As the invisible man responds to invisibility—and the particular metaphorical blindness proposed in the prologue's first lines—, the answer to the problem, at least for now, is not cure.⁷⁰ Rather, his response to invisibility is one of making do by making a home and giving an account, telling his story in the bildungsroman chapters of the novel, and exhorting his auditors to listen as he “belatedly stud[ies] the lessons of [his] own life” in order to “tell [them] what was really happening when [their] eyes were looking through”(581).

Making do, according to Michel de Certeau, names the tactical ways of operating that “intervene in a field which regulates them [...]but introduce into it a way of turning it to their advantage.” One of de Certeau's first examples is of a black man living in France, as he writes that the man “creates for himself a space in which he can find *ways of using* the constraining order of the place or of the language. Without leaving the place where he has no choice but to live and which lays down its law for him, he establishes within it a degree of *plurality* and creativity. By an art of

inquisitive, sensory relationship to an unknown or unfamiliar reality.

See:

<http://www.larousse.fr/dictionnaires/francais/t%C3%A2tonner/76826#TqYz1PfjHsYsjT3S.99>

⁶⁹ “About eighty-five years ago [my grandparents] were told that they were free, united with others of our country in everything pertaining to the common good, and, in everything social, separate life the fingers of the hand”(15).

⁷⁰ When I say the answer is not a cure [for blindness] I'm using the metaphor myself to capture a somewhat complex thought. Since—as the futile fight scenes attest—it won't fix the problem to fight, kill, convert, or otherwise rehabilitate individual perpetrators of injustice, the invisible man can't expect to somehow solve racism on his own. Some of the possibilities—playing the game but not taking it seriously, as the Golden Day vet advises, for example—are examples of “making do” in Michel de Certeau's sense of the word. They're ways of operating that don't have power over space or institutions, but which can act to one's own ends rather than the ends of power. The response the invisible man ultimately takes up is a “making do” of giving an account.

being in between, he draws unexpected results from his situation.”⁷¹ De Certeau’s articulation of making do as “an art of being in between” resonates beautifully with the invisible man’s location not “in Harlem but in a border area,” and his contention that invisibility “gives one a slightly different sense of time, you’re never quite on the beat. Sometimes you’re ahead and sometimes behind. Instead of the swift and imperceptible flowing of time, you are aware of its nodes, those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead. And you slip into the breaks and look around”(5, 8). The invisible man improperly, tactically uses the infrastructures of midcentury American life, living “rent free in a building rented strictly to whites” and siphoning massive quantities of electricity off of Monopolated Light & Power’s grid (6-7). In the prologue and epilogue, the invisible man’s making do is articulated as making a home to belong to in an ordinary inflected by racist racial ideology and systemic injustice.⁷² As he muses over what he can do under the circumstances, he understands the work of making do with invisibility as enacted by the narrative itself as a transmission to be received. As the narrative gives an account of his life and the reality he’s discerned, it mobilizes particular criptestemological strategies.

As the prologue and epilogue report on this experiential knowledge about invisibility, better and better understood through events of the novel’s bildungsroman chapters, the space of making-

⁷¹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life, Vol. 1* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 30.

⁷² I might have written, “in a culture ‘inadequate or inimical to [his] nurture’”(Sedgwick 149). Making do to make a home and give an account is what Eve Sedgwick would call a reparative project, as it tries to “assemble and confer plenitude on an object that will then have resources to offer an inchoate self”(149). Certainly, the novel assembles and tinkers with many different literary ancestors; deploys a form that adopts and amends the basic structure of Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground* and uses the long history of the *Bildungsroman*; and pieces together wisdom accumulated from the protagonist’s ex-slave grandfather, a doctor Vet at the Golden Day, Mr. Norton, and members of the Brotherhood. But nowhere is this reparative project of making do more earnest than in the novel’s epilogue, where the protagonist “affirm[s] the principle upon which [America] was built”(574) He’s tactically seizing and exploiting potentialities in the order of things; or otherwise explained, he protests the current “way of operating” or use of the founding documents that structure what the country is and means.

do is both a consequence of invisibility and a response to it. The narrator meditates on and explains his location in some detail: “The point now,” he writes,

is that I found a home—or a hole in the ground, as you will. Now don’t jump to the conclusion that because I call my home a ‘hole’ it is damp and cold like a grave; there are cold holes and warm holes. Mine is a warm hole.[. . .]I say all this to assure you that it is incorrect to assume that, because I’m invisible and live in a hole, I am dead. I am neither dead nor in a state of suspended animation. Call me Jack-the-Bear, for I am in a state of hibernation.(6)

As the story circles back around to the moment when the invisible man escapes into this hole in the epilogue, he resumes by saying, “So there you have all of it that’s important[. . .] I’m an invisible man and it placed me in a hole—or showed me the hole I was in, if you will, and I reluctantly accepted the fact. What else could I have done? Once you get used to it, reality is as irresistible as a club, and I was clubbed into the cellar before I caught the hint. Perhaps that’s the way it had to be; I don’t know”(572). In the prologue, invisibility has made finding and making a home necessary, and the invisible man’s habitation is an accomplishment, a creative act. Besides these specifications to understand his inhabitation of the hole as one of being home (versus being dead or frozen), the invisible man tells us about how he’s furnished his cave—famously, with 1,369 lights; with one radio-phonograph; and also with a bed, a fire, and a chair for listening to music and eating sloe gin sundaes (7; 13). As the rhythm of self-identifications develops (“Call me Jack the Bear”[6] becomes “Call me[. . .] a ‘thinker-tinker”[7]), the invisible man asserts that one of the marks of having lived as an invisible man is that he has developed “a certain ingenuity. I’ll solve the problem”(7). This “thinker-tinker” ingenuity that might manage to solve the problem of the protagonist’s invisibility is also engaged in future plans for home-making improvements. He is already wiring his walls for yet more filament lightbulbs; and he is making plans for gadgets to put his coffee on the fire from bed, to warm his bed, and to warm his shoes. He tells his auditors that he plans to rig up five phonographs in order to make his home vibrate with sound, which would address what he calls “a certain acoustical deadness in my hole”(8).

In the epilogue, the invisible man's characterization of his habitation emphasizes its status as a compelled response to his situation, something forced by racialized social injury. Living in his cellar, telling his story, and sharing his reflections as he belatedly studies the lessons of his own life represents homemaking for now, *thinker-tinkering*. The prologue and epilogue bear witness to the ways in which making do and developing an account of reality are far from deliberate and masterful for *Invisible Man*. It's characterized by incomplete knowing, ever still-developing knowing, and unknowing. The invisible man speaks of epiphanies and discoveries gleaned slowly and forcibly from experience, as when he says he had to be "clubbed into the cellar before [he] caught the hint"(572), or that he "learned in time though that it is possible to carry on a fight against them without their realizing it"(5). This unmasterful knowing and proceeding resounds again at the end of the prologue: "I became too snarled in the incompatible notions that buzzed within my brain [to kill an offending stranger]. I was a coward..."(14).⁷³ This non-mastery is the first way in which the invisible man's project is cripistemological. In "Proliferating Cripistemologies: A Virtual Roundtable," Jack Halberstam contributes to a conversation about what cripistemology might be: "Any cripistemology worth its name should identify modes of not knowing, unknowing, and failing to know. If conventional epistemologies always presume a subject who can know, a cripistemology will surely begin and end with a subject who knows merely that his or her ability is limited and that the body guarantees only the most fragile, temporary access to knowledge, to speech, to memory, and to connection."⁷⁴ It might be possible to understand the development and play with blindness

⁷³ Compare also, from the prologue, "Here I've set out to throw my anger into the world's face, but now that I've tried to put it all down the old fascination with playing a role returns, and I'm drawn upward again. So that even before I finish I've failed (maybe my anger is too heavy; perhaps, being a talker, I've used too many words). But I've failed. The very act of trying to put it all down has confused me and negated some of the anger and some of the bitterness"(579).

⁷⁴ Merri Lisa Johnson and Robert McRuer, "Proliferating Cripistemologies: A Virtual Roundtable," *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* 8, no. 2 (2014): 152.

metaphors as a correlate to the invisible man's keen sense of "the chaos against which [any] pattern [of living] was conceived"(580).

As Halberstam develops the thought, he turns to Temple Grandin's bewildered relationship to human behaviors, saying that she "takes nothing for granted in the realm of the human, questioning everything in her mission to convey new ways of knowing through counter-intuitive forms of unknowing."⁷⁵ If the initial blindness metaphor—invisibility as a function of others' refusal to see, or the construction of their inner eyes—is a figure for an all-too-intuitive form of unknowing, the novel's more literal and narrative non-sightedness moments represent cripistemologies that are potentially generative modes of making do in the context of American racism. Many of these moments are suffused with the unmasterful discovery of *tatouage*, figuring things out—and some, especially narrative modes that shift away from visual description in favor of haptic, auditory, and olfactory sense perception, produce nonsighted knowledge and experience. This particularized knowledge, what one can know "from the vantage point of living in and with our very specific bodyminds," as Carrie Sandahl puts it, molds the narration for sustained periods throughout the novel.⁷⁶

As established above, the prologue and epilogue write his hole as "*warm* and full of light," filled with music and the voice of an orator making an address that hovers in the moment of attempting, before any confirmed response. The bildungsroman narrative is punctuated by scenes where the protagonist navigates (or just plain gets through) temporary, literal nonsightedness. In the following sections, this chapter reads the novel's experiments in going blind beyond an insight about how American racism affects not just the white people it privileges, but also the non-white people it

⁷⁵ Ibid., 153.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 157. The prologue and epilogue contain recounted or remembered seeing; the single visual image is the description of the *sloe gin sundae* (8).

renders invisible. The novel's cripistemological mediations may also enable the invisible man to know along with his audience and communicate in a way they can receive, functioning in some moments as an access measure. Imagine a radio dial turning, tuning, then coming through clearly: you can't see me? Listen, then. Touch.

The Brotherhood Speech—Cripistemological Belonging

After getting out of the Liberty Paints hospital and giving an ex tempore speech at the scene of an eviction, the invisible man is recruited by a socialist organization, the Brotherhood, as an orator and organizer. When he gives his first official speech to a packed Harlem arena, the invisible man anticipates the performance of the prologue and the epilogue, indeed of the novel-narrative as a whole: he builds a text and an account of reality, a voice sounding out its otherwise apostrophic⁷⁷ address under extremely bright lights. As in the prologue, the invisible man's oration mobilizes striking disability metaphors to describe the problem of "dispossession," and at the same time, the invisible man's own mode of operating shifts registers to a nonsighted one, blinded as he is by the lights on the stage. The speech is nestled between scenes with the other members of the Brotherhood as they wait for the event to start and as they debrief afterwards; throughout the Brotherhood speech chapter, the invisible man expresses a sense that he is transforming; it's experienced as discomfort at first, but on stage it's semi-eschatological. This sense of transformation distinguishes the Brotherhood speech from the suspension or hibernation of the prologue and epilogue, for all of the scenes' resonances. Secondly, the Brotherhood speech departs from the tinker-thinker home-making of the hole in the ground. In the arena, the invisible man stands in a space he doesn't control, but belonging happens relationally, in the interaction with the audience. Home is generated between the invisible man's voice and the responding voices in the audience.

⁷⁷ I'm using the word apostrophe in the sense of addressing an absent interlocutor, here, and not quite as much in the sense of changing or redirecting one's address to a third party.

This home is one that's not isolated the way the hole of the prologue and epilogue is described as isolated; and the invisible man, blinded onstage, is not a disembodied voice inhabiting the querulousness of the final question about connection (who knows but that...), but rather is an embodied voice, propelling air with his lungs that touches tympanums as clapping hands touch his back. The invisible man's speech and his experience onstage represent an achievement, however temporary, of the hope expressed in "on the lower frequencies, I speak for you."

The speech scene begins in a taxi cab, described with great sensory detail but dimmed vision: the cab is dark (just the "red disk" of one of the Brothers' pipe is visible) and dominated by the smell of tobacco, warmth (touch), and sound (the Brother drawing on the pipe noisily). When the brothers arrive at the venue, they wait in a locker-room, hearing the chairs getting set up and, eventually, the crowd. The passage that connects the locker room to the arena is, again, dark; in moving through it toward the crowd, the scene is suffused with "the roar of the crowd [which] seemed to rise above us, flaring louder," and it is filled with a "smoky haze." The protagonist narrates their itinerary in great detail, giving the sense that he is experiencing his body moving through space, when he suddenly goes blind from the lights:

Then swiftly we were in the dark again, and climbing, the roar seeming to sink below us and we were moved into a bright blue light and down a ramp; to each side of which, stretching away in a curve, I could see rows of blurred faces—then suddenly I was blinded and felt myself crash into the man ahead of me (338).

Once onstage, he is able to see out and see policemen lining the hall, as well as Brother Jack.

He tells us that, as the crowd thundered in response to Brother Jack's salute,

I seemed to move in close, like the lens of a camera, focusing into the scene and feeling the heat and excitement and the pounding of voice and applause against my diaphragm, my eyes flying from face to face, swiftly, fleetingly, searching for someone I could recognize, for someone from the old life, and seeing the faces become vaguer and vaguer the farther they receded from the platform.(340)

This passage is typical for this chapter, in that it describes looking (scanning the audience's faces) in ways that amplify the non-visual elements of the scene—sound so loud that it becomes

tactile, heat—even as it uses simile based on a visual technology to articulate the embodied feeling of zoom or focus, a morphing experience of perception and space. It’s also typical in that the form describes vision in ways that present it as obscured or compromised as a sensory mode; this rhetoric is particularly striking here, since “seeing the faces become vaguer and vaguer” over a distance denotes the atmospheric perspective of normative optics, but seems like a deficit. Along with a descriptive mode that denigrates vision and accentuates non-visual senses, this passage assembles a kind of alternate vision [or alternate referent for “seeing”], recognition, that emphasizes the roominess of what we mean when we say, “I see.” As the scene is shifting from the locker room to the speech at the rally, this passage deploys many of the same formal strategies as the opening, when the invisible man was not yet himself blind. The locker room is full of murmurs and the odor of “ancient sweat, iodine, blood and rubbing alcohol”(333); the freezing alley smells of carbolic acid and rings with the sound of police horses’ hooves, and when he returns to the locker room it swells with the roar of the crowd. In these spaces, the invisible man is led through dark doors, the arena is filled with haze, and a striking vignette of mounted policemen gives way to flying shadows. When the invisible man inspects a “torn photograph tacked to the faded wall,” vision gives only particular kinds of information: “[there was a] man so dark and battered that he might have been of any nationality. Big and loose-muscled, he looked like a good man”(334). The subject of the photograph really becomes animate when the invisible man remembers the story his father told him about the fighter: he had been beaten blind in a crooked fight. In other scenes, the invisible man plunges into the alternative visions of memory and imagination: he imagines an out-of-body, bird’s eye view of

the scene he's living in⁷⁸; the smell of carbolic acid⁷⁹ reminds him of a dumping hole, and he extrapolates a vividly imagined scene of a railyard syphilitic; his feelings toward the crowd, which he hears at a distance, launch an incredibly visual memory of a dog, Master, who made him feel the same way ("I wanted to please, but did not trust"). In the sighted scenes that frame the invisible man's speech-giving experience, vision takes on these alternate forms, it is often dim and shadowy, and, as when he remarks that he "felt as though [he] had wandered into the percussion section of a symphony orchestra," the descriptions create scenes that are skewed to olfactory, haptic, and auditory sense data. When photographs come up, they are associated with the narrator's disorientation in the scene.⁸⁰

It is at the microphone, giving his own speech, that this non-sighted narrative tenor becomes literal non-sighted experience for the invisible man. He describes the moment of stepping into the light as a confinement, unpleasantly recalling his experience in the paint company hospital:

...[I entered] the spot of light that surrounded me like a seamless cage of stainless steel. I halted. The light was so strong that I could no longer see the audience, the bowl of human faces. It was as though a semi-transparent curtain had dropped between us, but through which they could see me—for they were applauding—without themselves being seen. I felt the hard, mechanical isolation of the hospital machine and I didn't like it.(341)

⁷⁸ "I seemed to view myself from the distance of the campus while yet sitting there on a bench in the old arena; dressed in a new blue suit; sitting across the room from a group of intense men[...] I seemed aware of it all from a point deep within me, yet there was a disturbing vagueness about what I saw, a disturbing unformed quality, as when you see yourself in a photo exposed during adolescence; the expression empty, the grin without character, the ears too large, the pimples, 'courage bumps,' too many and too well-defined"(335). The photo is another example of visuality that does not directly inform, but rather perception that is inflected by one's experience.

⁷⁹ Carbolic acid is another term for phenol, which was used as a lethal injection for disabled people in Aktion T4, the 'practice run' for the Nazi Holocaust's racist mass murders. While Zyklon-B was used to murder most people at concentration camps, phenol injections were more cost-effective for smaller groups of people and were used often at Auschwitz and Birkenau.

⁸⁰ In contemplating a prizefighter photo, he says: "Who would have thought I'd ever come here [where the boxer had fought and perhaps been blinded]? How things were twisted around!"(334; and when he tries to recognize familiar faces and fails, he narrates that failure with "I seemed to move in close like the lens of a camera"(340).

The invisible man's stay at the hospital was an experience of being held under the spotlight of the white medical gaze, symbolized in that chapter by a doctor's headlamp. The hospital scene has much in common with the Battle Royal, but it is in the name of science rather than entertainment that the invisible man was held against his will and electrocuted, power's violence visited upon his body in a literal way.⁸¹ The hospital scene is also a scene of being entirely unable to speak, and that may be a question hanging in the air in this moment as the invisible man is under pressure to orate. But in the sports arena, the "electric tingling along [the invisible man's] spine" isn't racialized medical torture,⁸² but rather it's caused by the "vibrations of the voices" in the hall, an effect of the invisible man's relationship to his potential audience, of being about-to-be heard. As the orator steps into the spotlight and goes blind, he is arrested by non-sightedness experienced as isolation. Being unable to see is a problem because he is visually cut off from his auditors.

The invisible man's eyes never adjust so long as he is on the stage. But his experience during the speech is unique in the novel for its transformational sense of having temporarily accessed a form of belonging to the ordinary, and thus the speech represents a fleeting experience of what the invisible man hopes to achieve in telling his story from his hole in the ground. The discomfiting scene of being looked at by "so many concentrating eyes" gives way to an aurally-mediated dynamic, as the invisible man shifts to a non-sighted mode of operating. When the mic doesn't transmit his

⁸¹ This scene is congruent with American medical history, in which black bodies were treated like specimens, and in which disability was used as a grounds for proving the inhumanity or subhumanity of black Americans. As many scholars have attested, racism and slavery was often given a medical alibi by pseudo-sciences like phrenology, as well as by biases in psychological and anatomical research. Well past the 19th century, as with the infamous Tuskegee experiments, in which black men exposed to syphilis were observed, treatment withheld, for medical research, black bodies were mistreated in the name of medicine. See Allan Brandt, "Racism and Research: The Case of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study," in *Sickness and Health in America*, 2nd ed., eds. Ronald L. Numbers and Judith Walzer Leavitt, 331–343 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

⁸² The hospital's medical amphitheater represents the same oppressive regime or form of power that subjects so many disabled people, black and non-black.

voice and the invisible man makes a joke, he hears laughter, then applause, and finally, a voice that will fall into a sustained call-and-response rhythm with the invisible man's own: "from down front a man's far-carrying voice called out, 'We with you, Brother. You pitch 'em we catch 'em!'"(342-3).⁸³

As the invisible man shifts into making-do mode of speaking and listening, "address[ing] the microphone and the co-operative voice before [him]," he has forgotten the Brotherhood pamphlets and so he is also making do by "fall[ing] back upon tradition [...] The old down-to-earth, I'm-sick-and-tired-of-the-way-they've-been-treating-us approach"(342). As he did in the *ex tempore* eviction speech, the invisible man produces a text whose hubs are words ironically twisted toward and away from their ordinary meanings, expressions that exploit the roominess in the words' referents: rather than "a law-abiding people," the arena speech is about "the uncommon people." As the theme develops, the speech uses a number of blindness figures and blindness metaphors to describe dispossession.

The speech starts its play on "uncommon" by aligning the "we" of the rally with (attributed) disability and class-flavored, disparaged ordinariness: "You know, there are those who think we who are gathered here are dumb. [...] They call us the 'common people.' But I've been sitting here listening and looking and trying to understand what's so *common* about us. I think they're guilty of a gross mis-statement of fact—we are the uncommon people—"(342, italics original). As the audience

⁸³ This voice consistently uses baseball language ("That's a strike, Brother"); compared to boxing, in which black bodies and Irish bodies inflicted and sustained injuries for sport/entertainment, baseball is particularly attached to American national identity and was an extremely segregated sport until 1947, when Jackie Robinson was included on the Dodgers' roster. The integration of baseball resulted from a thoughtful, tactical collaboration between Robinson and the Dodgers' white president, manager, and part-owner, Branch Rickey. Robinson was educated, sober, and married, and he was available because he had refused to move to the back of a military bus in Fort Hood and had been honorably discharged (statistically-better black baseball players existed but they were still deployed overseas in WWII). And his baseball game was notably tactical and smart: he was a base-stealer and a smart hitter. See the Society for American Baseball Research's Bio Project: <http://sabr.org/bioproj/person/bb9e2490>

applauds, they're applauding what seems to be a pushback to "their" understanding of the group gathered in the arena. The audience applauds the thought that "they" are wrong and that actually we are *not* common, in the sense that we don't belong with the negatively-coded unexceptional, the nothing-special, the lackluster. But as the invisible man explains what he means, he takes "us" out of the box that means "*uncommon* as actually quite exceptional, worthy!" and delivers a gentle rebuke. He lists all of the injustices visited upon the uncommon people, again drumming up a sense of belonging to the *uncommon* as a mark of (positive) distinction, a beleaguered side in a war. But then he says, "And do you know what makes us so uncommon? [...] *We let them do it!*"(342-3).

Here, belonging to the *uncommon* is defined as the condition of, by virtue of not resisting, having consented to dispossession, eviction, intimidation, and exploitation. Here, the exceptionality is acting as no one in such a situation would commonly or ordinarily act. This play on received understandings for *common* and *uncommon* works rhetorically for the invisible man to create an incredible impact, one that's met with profound silence. Conceptually, this play on meanings accomplishes two things: first, it points out weirdness of exceptionality in population science, which takes the bell curve and flips it on its side, transforming some outliers into undesirables but others into prized citizens. This scene underlines the desire for exceptionality, which Rosemarie Garland Thomson argues extends even to the undesirables, explaining part of the fascination with freak shows in the 19th and early 20th century: with modernity's standardization of everyday life and the citizen form's "unmarked, normative, leveled body," the freak show's popularity "suggests ambivalence toward [the] forfeiture of [...] bodily distinction."⁸⁴ Second, this play on meanings makes the ordinary and the common something to which the invisible man and his audience might

⁸⁴ Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 12.

aspire to belong, and it's an ordinariness that is not equal to quietism but compatible with the sound and fury of a fight.

This negative version of *uncommon* is soon explicitly connected to a metaphorical blindness, which as a term also wends and morphs in meaning as it develops. The invisible man declares:

These are the days of dispossession, the season of homelessness, the time of evictions. We'll be dispossessed of the very brains in our heads! And we're so *un*-common that we can't even see it! Perhaps we're too polite. Perhaps we don't care to look at unpleasantness. They think we're blind—*un*-commonly blind. And I don't wonder. (343, italics original)

Ignorance is expressed as an inability to see, with the qualification that it might not be congenital, so to speak, but a willful not-seeing that has to do with manners or timidity. This use of a blindness metaphor is a classic “opportunistic” metaphor for lack, one that's divorced from disability experience.

As the speech develops, the disability figures shift into a curious modification of the “Three Blind Mice” nursery rhyme. The protagonist continues: “Think about it, they've dispossessed us each of one eye from the day we're born. So now we can only see in straight white lines. We're a nation of one-eyed mice—Did you ever see such a sight in your life? Such an *un*-common sight!”(343). These claims play with the blindness metaphor in ways that depend on how a sighted sensorium perceives reality in order to make a racialized point: in this allegorical scenario, “they” impair the dispossessed by taking away one eye, and the resulting flaws in the dispossessed's knowing are described as having two qualities. First, because visual depth perception requires two eyes, the dispossessed can't see behind the surface of things; and second, this inability results in a kind of sightedness that conforms to power's ways of knowing (straight, white).⁸⁵

⁸⁵ The sense of “straight” in use here is the straight of “straight and narrow,” which is to say aligned with convention, moral laws, norms, and so on.

As the speech continues, the invisible man paints these one-eyed mice as particularly vulnerable, continuing to underline the threat as epistemological rather than merely physical. The invisible man's deployment of the nursery rhyme pivots on a figurative blindness that transforms into an embodied non-sightedness, one that explores how disability embodiment operates. Again, the invisible man starts by calling the dispossessed "a nation of one-eyed mice." In the nursery rhyme, the three blind mice are figures for the Oxford martyrs, Protestant bishops burned at the stake by Queen Mary I (the farmer's wife⁸⁶). In the rhyme, the mice's blindness is a figure for these bishops' misguided Protestantism, and their executions are displaced as amputation when the farmer's wife cuts off their tails. Scurrying around the farmer's wife, the blind mice of the original rhyme are met with swift, violent extermination. But during the speech, the voice calls out, "[A]in't a farmer's wife in the house"—for the one-eyed mice of dispossession, power's domination is less total, and its violence is less overt and physical than ideological and epistemological.⁸⁷ The threat that hovers over the shared everyday experience of the group gathered in the arena is that "they'll slip up on our blind sides and—*plop!* out goes our last good eye and we're blind as bats! Someone's afraid we'll see something"(343–4).⁸⁸ Epistemological violence is figured, here, as injury that

⁸⁶ Mary married Philip II of Spain, who had extensive imperial landholdings; the empire on which "the sun never sets" that became associated with the British Empire was originally used to describe Philip's colonies. See William S. Baring-Gould and Ceil Baring-Gould, eds., *The Annotated Mother Goose: Nursery Rhymes Old and New* (New York: Bramhall House, 1962).

⁸⁷ Of course, racialized violence was—as the invisible man's experience has brushed up against—often overt and physical.

⁸⁸ The "plop!" resonates with the scene when Brother Jack's false eye pops out, which I discuss below. And "blind as bats" is beautifully ironic, here: the conventional use of the metaphor drops out the way in which bats' sensoria are extremely well-adapted, in fact, to the environs and the times (of night) in which they move around and make a living. Bats that live in caves have adapted so that they can use very dim light in concert with sharp senses of smell and hearing for navigation and hunting. Bats' use of ultrasonic sounds for echolocation recalls the novel's final line, which characterizes its entire narrative as speaking *on the lower frequencies*, that is, in the form of long waves/radio waves, which though not themselves audible have the virtue of being able to travel extremely long distances, refracting around obstacles.

produces a more total blindness, and the mice's one-eyedness is recast as a potential threat to those in power rather than a debility.

The one-eyed mice metaphor, then, takes a nursery rhyme's figurative blindness (blindness is Protestantism, is a reason for state violence) and thinks along with the borrowed, figurative scene (a nation of injured, one-eyed mice under threat of further violence). It does so in a way that imagines what it would be to live and operate with one eye, making do. That is, the speech takes a flattening metaphor about being deprived, vulnerable, and debilitated, and imagines a figurative scene where time ticks on, things have bodies, and blindness is a way of operating. The one-eyed mice threaten; they have "lost" an eye, learning to see straight (and "white"), but even with their supposed deficit and even though they would have to be impolite/impolitic, they might see something and must be policed.⁸⁹ As the speech swells into its suggestion for what, then, to do, it makes reference to actually blind men, suggesting that actual disability is far preferable to the partial and figurative blindness of the one-eyed mice.

As the invisible man elaborates on how the people gathered in the arena's crowd belong to one another, and as he takes on the question of what to do in response to dispossession, he describes two scenes of people making their way down the street. "I believe one eye is enough to lose without resistance and I think that's your belief," he says, and continues:

So let's get together. Did you ever notice, my dumb one-eyed brothers, how two totally blind men can get together and help one another along? They stumble, they bump into things, but they avoid dangers too; they get along. Let's get together, uncommon people. With both our eyes we may see what makes us so uncommon, we'll see *who* make us so uncommon! Up to now we've been like a couple of one-eyed men walking down opposite sides of the street. Someone starts throwing bricks and we start blaming each other and fighting among ourselves. But we're mistaken! Because there's a third party present. There's a smooth, oily scoundrel running down the *middle* of the wide gray street throwing stones[...] And he knows he's got us on our blind side and he's been popping away till he's got us silly—*uncommonly* silly! [...] I say come on, cross over! Let's make an alliance! I'll look out for you,

⁸⁹ After saying that someone's afraid the dispossessed will see something, the invisible man suggests that this is why there are numerous police officers lining the arena (344).

and you look out for me! [...] Let's take back our pillaged eyes! Let's reclaim our sight; let's combine and spread our vision.(344, italics original)

With these scenes, he makes two points: first of all, the debility of having one eye stems entirely from the fact that one cannot see who is hurting them if the hurt comes from a certain angle; and second, to protect themselves against their aggressors, citizens of the one-eyed nation need to operate more like fully blind people, interdependently, though they may stumble. The invisible man's speech has contained lots of language that describes dispossession as a figurative blindness in order to contain a truth about how political violence often operates not just materially⁹⁰ but also by boxing in perception and understanding; and to contain a truth about how political injury is often as physical as it is ordinary. Even so, the ethical imperative to "get together" is modeled after how "totally blind" people operate; helping one another along is juxtaposed to the vulnerability of one-eyed men who, alone and apart, can't perceive "what's really happening." This interdependent, disabled mode of operating—getting together as blind men do—"cures" the figurative blindness of ideology ("With both our eyes we may see what makes us so uncommon, we'll see *who* makes us so uncommon"). Otherwise stated, the invisible man's speech appeals explicitly to disability as a source of tactics, ways of making-do in the ordinary.

The blindness metaphor's multiplicity is artfully mixed up, here: the dispossessed are only partially nonsighted but still unable to see (though their remaining eyes literally function, they can't see reality for what it is), and they are proceeding under threat of injury to their remaining eye. If the dispossessed were to get together in order to get along *like blind men do*, in the figurative scene they would still be (partially) nonsighted but they would be able to see our aggressor and fend him off, together; allegorically this enabling interdependence aligns with being able to perceive reality and effectively work for change. Blind modes of operating, based on the ordinary lives of disabled

⁹⁰ Economically; through unequal access to housing, nutrition, and medical attention; etc.

people, are an analogy that serves as a model for the dispossessed, whose situation is itself described as a figurative disability that, in order to produce a better perception of reality for the audience being addressed, is made into a fiction and given a scene whose world—its bodies, experiences, and their relations—can be examined and studied. Contrary to narrative prosthesis' flattened representation of disability, disability metaphor signifies here by imagining blindness as an embodied experience, and extending the metaphorically instructive scene, making of it a small fiction.

These shifts between forms and figures of blindness are deepened when we recall the invisible man's situation, blinded as he is by the stage spotlights. The speech breaks off momentarily after the invisible man proposes that the dispossessed emulate "totally blind" men, getting together and getting along as one-eyed, uncommon people. And in this moment, he returns to an awareness of his own literal non-sightedness. He says, "It was a natural pause and there was applause [...] I leaned forward, straining to see through the barrier of light. They were mine, out there, and I couldn't afford to lose them"(345). This blind moment marks a transition: it precedes and is accompanied by a transformation in the form of an affective *éclat*. His initial experience of being blind on the stage was a non-sighted being-looked-at, the "seamless cage of stainless steel" with its "hard mechanical isolation." After building from the moment his voice began to carry into the arena, the narrator's nonsightedness shifts slightly away from being dominated, and that shift happens via his auditory call-and-response connection with the crowd. The invisible man's blindness onstage becomes an enhanced, tactile experience of being in a body: words "rip from [his] solar plexus"; "[his] shoulders were squared, [his] chin thrust forward and [his] eyes focused straight into the light"(345). He declares:

"I feel your eyes upon me. I hear the pulse of your breathing. And now, at this moment, with your black and white eyes upon me, I feel...I feel..."
I stumbled in a stillness so complete that I could hear the gears of the huge clock mounted somewhere on the balcony gnawing upon time.
[...] "I feel, I feel that I have become *more human*. [...]...I feel the urge to affirm my feelings...I feel that here, after a long and desperate and uncommonly blind journey, I have

come home...Home! With your eyes upon me I feel that I've found my true family! My true people! My true country!"(346)

The invisible man describes a surge of felt belonging and being-in-common, one that is aligned with a *nostos* that is about returning to oneself, authenticity, and about familial, tribal, and national belonging. Being more human and being home is an effect of the invisible man's compulsive⁹¹ oration, the result of speaking truth to an only vaguely known audience of *semblables*. I would argue that the narrator's oration in the prologue and the epilogue—indeed the novel as a whole—is taken up under similar conditions, described in similar terms, and ultimately attempts to recreate the rally speech's experience of belonging and communicated insight about reality. While the novel's final moments anticipate recalcitrance rather than a "co-operative voice" ("Ah,' I can hear you say, 'so it was all a build-up to bore us with his buggy jiving. He only wanted us to listen to him rave!"[581]), when the final lines ask "what else could I do?," they expose a lingering hope that the invisible man's broadcast will be received.⁹² Though it was previously denied to him by American racism, the narrator momentarily attains a sense of belonging and being at home, being human, and he does so with an oral text that even in the rally-speech moment he hopes will be made into text. Later that night, he says, "I sat there in the dark trying to recall the sequence of the speech. Already it seemed the expression of someone else. Yet I knew that it was mine and mine alone, and if it was recorded by a stenographer, I would have a look at it tomorrow"(353). Thus the rally speech and its effects are characterized as an *ex tempore* oration written down for sighted consideration at a (temporal) distance, an analogue for the form "a disembodied voice"(581) takes as it "put[s] invisibility down in black and white"(14). And if the novel's narrative project of discerning reality and forging a home

⁹¹ The narrator tells us that just before these exclamations, "I suddenly felt naked, sensing that the words were returning and that something was about to be said that I shouldn't reveal"(345).

⁹² The lower frequencies, aside from being actually invisible and inaudible themselves, are the extremely long radio waves that are capable of transmitting messages over large distances.

and a belonging in an American ordinary is an attempt to recreate the invisible man's experience on the arena stage, it's worth underlining again that the invisible man experiences belonging and develops his speech's complex of disability metaphors to make knowledge about dispossession while he operates in a non-sighted modality.

Brother Jack's Eye, or the Falling Out

One of the novel's most striking instances of an actually disabled character occurs when the white leader of the Brotherhood, Brother Jack, becomes suddenly visible as a partially blind man: his false eye pops out of its socket. This revelatory event occurs during an intensely racialized conversation that crystallizes the invisible man's fundamental disagreements with the Brotherhood about whose knowledge counts, and marks a key moment in the invisible man's growing disenchantment with the Brotherhood and organized socialism as a way to *make do* in a racist American ordinary. Despite the fact that Brother Jack's embodiment literalizes the figurative one-eyed brothers of the invisible man's rally speech, the invisible man's reaction is not one of identification, but rather one of conspicuously strong disgust and rejection. The scene is structured by a tension between abstraction and experience, and the exchange between Jack and the invisible man when Jack's eye pops out serves to point to the motivated, rhetorical nature of Jack's efforts to assign meaning to his eye, and it serves to lay bare the Brotherhood's attachment to a fantasy, in a way that casts doubt on any allegorical resolution of blindness/racist knowing in the form of a cure yet to come.

After the arena speech, the invisible man is attacked by a disapproving committee of white Brotherhood members who feared the power of a crowd so moved, arguing that the speech was "the antithesis of the scientific approach"(350). In this moment, Brother Jack defends the invisible man, saying that "if it is [a mob], then it seems to be a mob that's simply boiling over to come along with us [...].it's up to you to organize that energy. Well, it's going to be organized and not by a bunch

of timid sideline theoreticians arguing in a vacuum, but by getting out and leading the people!”(350–51). In the disciplinary meeting convened after the invisible man organizes a march, however, Brother Jack is the voice of sneering sarcasm. The march is in honor of a recently-ousted black member of the Brotherhood, Tod Clifton, who has been murdered by a white police officer:

“Look,” I said, “an unarmed man was killed. A brother, a leading member shot down by a policeman. We had lost our prestige in the community. I saw the chance to rally the people, so I acted. If that was incorrect, then I did wrong, so say it straight without this crap. It’ll take more than sarcasm to deal with that crowd out there.”(466)

When Jack explains his furor, he captures the terms of the invisible man’s eventual falling out with the Brotherhood. He says, “Under your leadership, a traitorous merchant of vile instruments of anti-Negro, anti-minority racist bigotry has received the funeral of a hero. Do you still ask what’s wrong?”(466). When he was shot, Clifton had been hawking Sambo dolls, and this symbolic infraction matters more to the Committee than the ways of thinking and acting that had made (and still make) a pattern, all-too-ordinary scenes of black men harassed by the police and killed. It’s also an instance of whitesplaining: Brother Jack’s supposes that his understanding of Clifton’s death and the people of Harlem, derived from the rationalist, “scientific” theories of the Brotherhood, trumps the invisible man’s more ordinary understanding, derived from personal experience and experience with other black people in everyday scenes.

As the invisible man insists that what happened to Clifton was about race, he is told that he was “not hired to think”(470). The conversation escalates into a debate about who is right about Harlem’s political consciousness, and more broadly about whose knowledge counts, on what grounds, and about whose knowledge gets to inform action. Brother Jack tells the invisible man, “Let *us* handle the theory and the business of strategy,” citing experience and strategic knowledge gained from study. In an attempt to offer insight, the invisible man insists: “the political conscious of Harlem is exactly a thing I know something about. That’s one class they wouldn’t let me skip. I’m describing a part of reality which I know”(471). This knowledge, based in “the gin mills and the

barber shops and the juke joints and the churches[...] Yes, and the beauty parlors on Saturdays when they're frying hair" are dismissed in favor of "discipline," abiding by the decisions of the committee. Throughout this conversation, it becomes clear that the Brotherhood isn't interested in the plight of black Harlemites in itself ("crowds are only our raw materials, *one* of the raw materials to be shaped to our program"[472]), and that the committee serves an ideological revolution before they serve those dispossessed. While the invisible man says, "I'll stand on [what I hear in the gathering places of everyday Harlem] as I stand on what I see and feel and on what I've heard, and what I know"; "No," Brother Jack declares, elaborating later that "We do not shape our policies to the mistaken and infantile notions of the man in the street. Our job is not to *ask* them what they thing but to *tell* them!"(473).

At the climactic moment of the chapter, the invisible man insinuates that using the black masses to further one's agenda without inviting them to determine the agenda amounts to political slavery, asking Brother Jack, "Wouldn't it be better if they called you Marse Jack?"(473). It is with this racial epithet that Brother Jack becomes visible as a partially blind man; he springs up, causing his eye to pop out. But the way in which the invisible man describes the moment is curious: he is suspended in a confused, intensely visual surprise that can only perceive shapes and light, describing the behavior of the prosthetic as a round, hard object that after a while he is able to identify as an eye. Meanwhile, Jack stashes the eye in a glass of water and continues to speak to the invisible man, unruffled.

Once he notices the invisible man's surprise, Jack tries to make a symbol of the "line of red rawness showing where the lid refused to close"(474), first in a pedagogical, superior way, and then in a bid for identification. This resignification points to the rhetoricity of making blindness signify, prompting the novel's apostrophically addressed audience to a greater awareness of how they are being operated upon. Jack first uses the eye as an object lesson in sacrifice and discipline, holding it

up “as though it were a medal of merit.” He explains, “I was ordered to carry through an objective and I carried in through. Understand? Even though I had to lose my eye to do it...”(475).

The invisible man’s reaction is extreme, perhaps in part because he scorns the way Jack is asking him to understand his eye, as a badge of commitment. But his response is stronger than exasperation with rhetoric, or even the heated conversation, would suggest. Ironically, the invisible man is intent that Jack make his blindness invisible again, as when he says, “I don’t give a damn how you lost it as long as you keep it hidden,” and “now hide the bleeding wound!”(475).

As the invisible man processes what Jack has revealed and looks at Jack carefully, Jack shifts gears to speak less as a man playing a role, but rather as himself, “an actor who’d just finished a part in a play and was speaking again in his natural voice.” He makes a claim that he repeats at the end of the scene, “I realize how you feel,” referring to the invisible man’s discomfort at the sight of his eye. He adds, “I sincerely hope it never happens to you. Sincerely”(476–7). As he shifts gears to talk about seeing his eye for the first time and to admit he’d rather not have the injury, he leaves propagandistic, figurative resignifications behind, speaking as an ordinary man with a blind eye who is trying to smooth over the rumpled social relations the revelation of his eye has created between the horrified invisible man and himself. These bids for connection logically disarm the metaphorical instrumentalization of Jack’s eye, and even warn against continuing to submit to the committee. That is, Jack tries to connect with the invisible man by saying that he hopes they never have blindness in common, and by extension that he hopes the invisible man will not toe the line of discipline to the point of such “sacrifice.”

Despite the invisible man’s internal outrage that Jack has “disemboweled himself to confound [him],” and that Jack is trying to intimidate him “with his goddam blind glass eye,” for most of the people present, the eye popping out is a much quieter event (475–6). “And the others had known it all along. They aren’t even surprised,” the invisible man muses; Jack must pause and

ask “What is the matter?”(474). This evidence that, for others, the eye’s appearance on the scene was not so shattering highlights the strategy in Jack’s explanations. It would be easy to read the invisible man’s excessive reaction—especially with its confused pronoun slippages (“You’re sitting here, ain’t I?”)—as the response to a castration of a man he thought was his leader. But given the novel’s overall preoccupations with knowledge, and their specific intensification in this conversation, it may be useful to understand the way the invisible man is rocked as a kind of encounter with his unknowing, one Stanley Cavell has associated with the uncanny.⁹³ He must avow the ways in which he wasn’t really seeing what was going on with Brother Jack; he had failed to discern an apparently important detail, and this throws his entire sense of interface with the ordinary. His description of the eye falling out, after all, is visual but vague, registering forms and textures, light and dark, an object that makes effects, but without yet quite making sense of the visual data: “[...]something seemed to erupt out of his face. [...] his arm shot out and snatched an object the size of a large marble and dropped it, plopl! into his glass, and I could see the water shooting up in a ragged, light-breaking pattern[...]I stared at the glass, seeing how the light shone through, throwing a transparent, precisely fluted shadow against the dark grain of the table”(474).

As he puts his eye back in his socket to calm the invisible man down, Jack says something that resonates with the novel’s final lines, which express its deepest hope: “But who knows, Brothers,’ he said, with his back turned, ‘perhaps if we do our work successfully the new society will provide me with a living eye. Such a thing is not at all fantastic, although I’ve been without mine for quite a while...”(477). Though he insists that this cure-solution for his blindness is not at all

⁹³ In a set of lectures that understand skepticism as a philosophical problem connected to our inability to know with certainty that “The world exists and I and others in it,” Cavell writes that the uncanny is “skepticism’s happening all at once, the world’s vanishing at the touch [...] a horrified vision of ordinariness, of the unremarkable other seen as just that unremarkable other.” *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 158.

fantastic, he has begged this question. And in the context of the conversation, in which acute injustices must be ignored in the name of “the long view,” this attachment to some society to come becomes visible as an untenable way of making do, given the circumstances of ordinary life for Harlem’s black residents. The distance between the present and “the new society” had already been intimated by the symbolic Brotherhood poster that Harlemites had begun to hang on their walls. “After the Struggle: The Rainbow of America’s Future” uses a “a blond brother (in overalls) and a leading Irish sister, representing the dispossessed present; and Brother Tod Clifton and a young white couple (it had been felt unwise simply to show Clifton and the girl) surrounded by a group of children of mixed races, representing the future”(385). The present is ostensibly defined by class, but the image betrays the default whiteness of analyses that don’t “ride ‘race’,” as Brother Jack accuses the invisible man of doing (469). And the imaginable future of racial integration is deeply inflected by racism. (Ironically, the representative black man, Tod Clifton, is mere image, and is quickly posthumously excommunicated as a Brother for bad appearances.)

As he belatedly studies the lessons of his life, the protagonist gains from this scene a conversation that puts abstraction’s poverty into relief—and a conversation that functions as an argument for ordinary knowledges and ordinary experience as modes for perceiving what is really happening and discerning what must be done. While it doesn’t rule out the possibility of anti-racist efforts across racial lines, it expresses skepticism that racism can be addressed indirectly or through the idealism of scientific and philosophical knowledge. Jack’s blindness signifies as a cautionary tale about unquestioning dedication to organizational edicts, and it is also something that marks Jack as belonging to those who do not see the invisible man because of the “construction of their *inner* eyes”(3). And this is a scene that by analogy rejects an approach to American racism that suspends life in anticipation of a cure. In an ordinary where racism is enduring and those milling around in the

street do not see him, the invisible man asks his audience to listen to a narrative in the form of itinerant, experiential knowledge.

Conclusion

This chapter has been an exercise in slowing reading down, watching various non-sightednesses emerge, re-emerge, and track shift, successive presences that signify in place and in a network with the others. It's been an attempt to tracking the way figurative meanings for blindness, drawn on as resources for communicating an urgent message, are used to describe the behavior of American racism when it suffuses ordinary operations. It has tracked the way the singular, representative orator that is using disability figures lingers over the thought, *blindness*, imagining it as an experience of being in the world, its potential causes and effects, using that small imagined world in order to understand his own. It's tried to trace what happens when A *is* B is mentioned in the same speech as B *is* C. When blindness is used metaphorically to name ideological mystification, as in the one-eyed mice metaphor, and then used to name a model of interdependence, as with the totally blind men in the street, here's what happens: the logics that underwrite the "is" that connects the primary and secondary terms in each iteration twist around the common term (*blindness*), putting readers/auditors through the paces of an ambivalent arrangement of meanings. Put another way, what we're observing here is not a deployment of blindness metaphors whose logics behave consistently enough to be decoded with a key or mapped. Instead, it's a self-conscious, musing play with meanings that takes us through an *itinerary* of metaphors (holes in meaning plugged with other-shaped pegs).

These paths through metaphors without a key are the moves of an ordinary practitioner-philosopher, a thinker-tinker. Michel de Certeau contrasts the voyeur who views a city from a tall building to "ordinary practitioners" who walk through it. The voyeur indulges in a "fiction of knowledge" that "transforms the bewitching world by which one was 'possessed' into a text that lies

before one's eyes," one that can be read and mastered. *Invisible Man* relinquishes this view, or rather doesn't pretend to it, embracing the cripistemological unknowing of the "walkers" as it marks out literal paths through the world and philosophical/intellectual paths of a mind who is trying to "see what's really happening." Walkers, de Certeau argues,

make use of spaces that cannot be seen; their knowledge of them is as blind as that of lovers in each other's arms. The paths that correspond in this intertwining, unrecognized poems[sic] in which each body is an element signed by many others, elude legibility. It is as though the practices organizing a bustling city were characterized by their blindness. The networks of these moving, intersecting writing compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator, shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces.(93)⁹⁴

If an itinerary could be traced, then, or if many of these path-poems could be partially recounted, the report would be a weak theory that is truer to—or at least more formally symmetrical with—the shape of ordinary life. By recognizing how *Invisible Man* traffics in various blindnesses, we can recognize its critique of scopic and gnostic pretensions, the ways it inhabits blindness as a defection from power's ways of operating and knowing. This is especially the case given the fact that the novel's experiments with taking its readers through multiple metaphorical logics are accompanied by represented non-sightedness as an actual experience (temporary or not), and by narrative modes that produce a non-sighted encounter with the aesthetic world that itself functions as an analogy (if not metaphor) for the midcentury United States.

The result is an everyday life theory of growing up black in midcentury America, making one's way among others who live and operate in white-dominated perceived realities, in particular and whiteness-serving forms of the world. A blindness metaphor helps the invisible man articulate the fundamental disconnect—if knowledge is mediated (inner-eye) visually, as it is by the logic of the invisibility/blindness metaphor—between his experience and the experience others imagine for him, an imagined experience that structures how the world works, what's possible. But as I've tried to

⁹⁴ De Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 93.

show, reading the novel with a disability studies lens (or should I say perspective, or should I say orientation), without presuming mastery of its blindness metaphor, bears fruit. Crucially, the invisible man's tactical project as he goes underground in response to his invisibility operates in a non-sighted mode, which is both an avowal of his own incomplete knowledge (according to the logic of the first metaphor) but also a practical, accessible way of operating when you're addressing a nation whose "eyes are looking through"(581).

CHAPTER TWO, The Time is Out of Joint: Deafness and Injury in Toni Morrison's

Beloved

And this being-with specters would also be, not only but also, a politics of memory, of inheritance, and of generations.
(Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*)

Toni Morrison's 1987 novel, *Beloved*, is based on a historical event that is haunting for its great systemic and familial violence. It's an event that precipitated an extended legal battle, one that was followed closely by 19th century news media but had been all but forgotten when Morrison decided to write and pass its story on. In 1856, a woman named Margaret Garner escaped from slavery in Kentucky by crossing the Ohio River into Cincinnati, accompanied by her husband, Robert Garner, her four children, and her husband's parents. Under the auspices of the Fugitive Slave Act, her owner, Archibald Gaines, came with U.S. marshals to the place where the Garners were staying, intending to reclaim Margaret Garner and her family as property and take them back to Kentucky. But the family barricaded itself into the house and exchanged fire with Gaines and the marshals; when capture seemed inevitable, Margaret Garner cut the throat of her two-year-old daughter Mary, killing her, stabbed at her sons Thomas and Samuel, and struck her infant daughter Priscilla with a shovel, badly bruising her nose. The inquest of Margaret Garner's testimony, given at the county jail, reports that she voluntarily confessed, saying "that her determination was to have killed all the children and then destroy herself rather than return to slavery."⁹⁵ Historically, the event holds the distinction of prompting the longest fugitive slave case: while most cases lasted two or three days at most, the Garner case lasted for four weeks.⁹⁶ As abolitionists—most notably Lucy

⁹⁵ Steven Weisenburger, *Modern Medea: A Family Story of Slavery and Child-Murder from the Old South* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), 89.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 5–6.

Stone—mobilized the situation to make a case against slavery, they narrated it as an instance of terrible but righteous motherhood in the face of certain sexual abuse for enslaved women. The case lasted as long as it did not just for its sensational infanticide, but also because it cut to the heart of slavery’s foundational violence: legally, it begged questions of jurisdiction and the legal standing (read: the human status) of enslaved people. Did Ohio have a primary right to try Margaret Garner for murder as it would a freeperson, or did Kentucky have a primary right to enforce the Fugitive Slave Act and remand Margaret Garner, as property, back to her owner?

Morrison found a newspaper clipping about the Garner case when she was an editor at Random House, working on *The Black Book*, a compendium of over 500 images and texts chronicling African American history.⁹⁷ The clipping served as inspiration for *Beloved*, but as Morrison has said in interviews, the novel gives Garner’s story a life of its own: “I did not do much research on Margaret Garner other than the obvious stuff, because I wanted to invent her life, which is a way of saying I wanted to be accessible to anything the characters had to say about it. Recording her life as lived would not interest me, and would not make me available to anything that might be pertinent.”⁹⁸ *Beloved* imagines Margaret Garner as she has survived, re-naming her Sethe, a name that rhymes with the Greek underworld’s river of forgetfulness and with seething; according to the narrative, Sethe is named after her father, a black man who was transported to America on the same ship as Sethe’s mother. *Beloved* tells the story of Sethe and her family as they lived *after* the face-off, the infanticide, and the trial. Furthermore, the world *Beloved* animates is a world in which the

⁹⁷ Middleton Harris, Ernest Smith, Morris Levitt, and Roger Furman, eds., *The Black Book* (New York: Random House, 1974). With the newspaper clipping about the Margaret Garner case, the book includes slave auction notices, pieces authored by abolitionists like Frederick Douglass, photographs of war heroes, patents registered by black inventors, sheet music for freedom songs, lynching photographs, and posters from “Black Hollywood” films.

⁹⁸ Marsha Darling, “Ties That Bind,” *The Women’s Review of Books* 5, no. 6 (March 1988): 4-5.

murdered baby daughter has not passed on, and as *Beloved* gives an account of the aftereffects of a generations-deep racialized violence, it stages a scene in which “the time is out of joint,” haunted by a lost future and a not-past past made present, begging its own questions about property relations and “being-with specters [as] a politics of memory, of inheritance, and of generations,” as Jacques Derrida puts it.⁹⁹

In the first pages of the novel, Sethe and her family are haunted by the murdered baby’s spirit, and a man from the Kentucky plantation, Paul D, has arrived to their house at 124 Bluestone Road after years of capture, escape, and wandering. When Paul D stomps and shouts at the spirit’s spite, the spirit is ejected from the house. Three days later, the murdered baby emerges from a nearby stream in the form of an embodied young woman who calls herself Beloved. As many critics have noted, *Beloved’s* narrative drifts from character to character, clinging to their thoughts, to the ways their memories drift and surge, and to the stories they tell one another. From these narratives, we gather bits of the past to learn that Sethe escaped from a plantation in Kentucky called Sweet Home, which was run by a man named Schoolteacher after the owner, Mr. Garner, had died. Though Mr. Garner bragged that his slaves—including Paul D and Sethe’s husband, Halle—are men, Schoolteacher measures their bodies and tallies their animal characteristics to confirm and argue for the racial, racist ideology that underpins American slavery. Pregnant and lactating, Sethe makes her escape after being forcibly milked by Schoolteacher’s nephews and flogged for telling the plantation mistress. Because of Schoolteacher’s studies and because one of Sweet Home’s men was sold like so much livestock to pay off debts, Sethe has already sent her children, two boys and a girl, to join her husband’s mother, Baby Suggs, in Ohio.

⁹⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx* (New York: Routledge, 1994), xviii.

When Sethe escapes, she leaves Halle behind because she cannot find him, later learning that he has gone mad because he witnessed the nephews steal her milk. Pregnant, flayed, she gives birth to a daughter on her way to Ohio, aided by a recently released white indentured servant named Amy Denver. After Sethe recovers for 28 days with her children and Baby Suggs at 124 Bluestone Road, Schoolteacher comes into the yard to claim his property. In a scene the book refers to as the Misery, Sethe cuts her young daughter's throat, stabs her sons, and nearly swings the infant, Denver, into the wall of the shed where they are hiding. At the book's opening, eighteen years have passed in the company of the baby ghost, Baby Suggs is dead, and the boys have run away. Given its narration and its narrative, *Beloved* has prompted sustained critical attention to its account of survival, memory, history, and trauma. Less recognized is how *Beloved* is full of disability (including psychological trauma) and how it explicates the injury of slavery by giving those disabilities particular logics, thus offering an account of disability and its racial specificities.

Though my readings focus on Sethe's daughter Denver, her peculiar deafness, and her relationship to the revenant Beloved, this chapter is anchored around a simple but difficult task: considering Beloved as a black, disabled, and undead character, as opposed to one that functions as a figure for Sethe's trauma. Avery Gordon's work on haunting comes the closest to considering Beloved as a kind of post-slavery subject in her own right when it announces its intent to dwell on how "the ghost enters, all fleshy and real, with wants, and a fierce hunger, and [how] she speaks, barely, of course, and in pictures and a coded language." Gordon continues, "This ghost, Beloved, forces a reckoning: she makes those who have contact with her, who love and need her, confront an event in their past that loiters in the present. But Beloved, the ghost, is haunted too, and therein lies the challenge Morrison poses."¹⁰⁰ Turning her attention to what Beloved says, does, and wants,

¹⁰⁰ Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 139.

Gordon asks, “if we shift perspective, begin to approach the ghost’s desires, what will we find?”¹⁰¹ In answering this question, Gordon highlights Beloved’s musings, along with her explicitly stated desires of regaining “the face” she lost and finding a place to be in, connecting them with the only trace knowledge official history holds of those who were lost on the Middle Passage.¹⁰² Hortense Spillers has already identified the violence of treating human beings as greater or smaller quantities of flesh, which by her account obliterates any Africanist sense of intact kinship systems by disintegrating the gender binary of reproductive heterosexuality into property relations’ objecthood.¹⁰³ Gordon’s account, centered on how present absences work, is similarly invested in how the Middle Passage more than erased black lives and black personhood, though she focuses less on the ramifications of this “cultural vestibularity” for black gender identity and more on its ramifications for historical memory. Ultimately, Gordon’s argument is that Beloved is someone “lost on the way from there—Africa—to here—America—[...] a sign without a referent,” because she is not just Sethe’s daughter returned from the dead, but also one of the people deep undersea who are, like Beloved in the words of *Beloved*’s epilogue, “disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her, and even if they were, how can they call her if they don’t know her name?” (274).¹⁰⁴ Gordon argues that Beloved is telling readers that there’s something missing, that we’re haunted. For Gordon’s argument, Beloved’s “need[...] to be remembered and accommodated” (after Barbara Christian) is about how erased, repressed elements of history make themselves known to us: Beloved the ghost is a bridge from past to present that via haunting forces us to attend to forgotten things whose remembering informs our action. Beloved’s desires are the

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 175.

¹⁰² Ibid., 177–79.

¹⁰³ Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 64–81.

¹⁰⁴ Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 178.

desires of a small crawling already? baby and of the people cast away and forgotten in the Middle Passage: to be taken in and called by their name.¹⁰⁵

But Morrison's text has built something that contains even more, still: *Beloved* does indeed register the historio-mnemonic violence that Gordon highlights, and it is populated with bodies and minds that, having "gained the dry bank" or having been born there, have been subject to great physical and psychic violence under American racial slavery, not to mention the violence of being denied full personhood by the very letter of the law. For most of the people in the novel's world, this violence has produced acquired physical and psychological disability as racialized injury. But Beloved, the figure that focuses Gordon's attention, has a particular and unfamiliar relationship to disability, as does her sister Denver, who is often examined only peripherally. When she emerges from the stream behind the house, Beloved has strange mobility, strength, and weakness; strange vocal timbre, mental, and expressive behaviors; strange scars and skin. Denver is "a charmed child"(41) who is read by many in the community as "simple-minded"; the narrative insists on her fatness; and she experiences supra-sensational vision with deafness that comes not with physical abuse, but with traumatic knowledge; temporary, the deafness ends with a shift in the house's haunting.

Beloved and Denver are given embodiments are non-normative and neuro-atypical, though they do not acquire these disabilities, exactly, as the result of living as an enslaved person. I read the kind of disabilities that are being produced here as distinct from any sort of disability we are used to imagining in that they constitute something outside the usual understanding of disability as

¹⁰⁵ The moniker "crawling already? baby" holds another violent uncertainty of knowledge: Sethe thinks a great deal about how she was cut off from the kinship systems that would have passed on knowledge about childrearing, and when her daughter is sent ahead and cared for by Baby Suggs in a community where that knowledge lives and circulates freely, her daughter's development accelerates and she begins crawling.

congenital or acquired. Congenital disability is distinguished from acquired disability temporally: one is disability that was always there and always will be, in the family's genes, and the other has a starting point, imagining an absence of disability that is transformed into a presence of disability by illness, accident, or harm. This chapter considers these questions alongside the novel's more explicit engagements with temporality, namely its meditations on how, in a haunting, *the time is out of joint*. This is itself a disability metaphor that describes both the narrative development of the novel and the relationship of the ghost to past, present, and future. How is the time is out of joint, exactly, given that the crawling-already? baby has returned, "the age it would have been had it lived"(255)? And what does that mean for the novel's preoccupation with the long-standing, enduring, and also event-condensed violence to the family's lineage, grievously injured when the crawling-already? baby was killed?

Morrison's challenge, in writing of slavery, disability and ghosts, is especially powerful for advancing disability studies scholarship that sets itself the task of reckoning with its own hauntings: specifically, reckoning with how, in an American context, race inflects the experience of disability, and reckoning with experiences of and relationships to disability specific to the Global South—that is, in communities historically or currently subjugated by colonial powers, communities that are as a result particularly impoverished and vulnerable to disease, malnutrition, industrial accident, environmental dangers. Black disability studies has called for more sophisticated analyses of how disability works culturally and materially at the intersections of racial and ethnic identities, responding to Chris Bell's famous indictment of disability studies' implicit whiteness. In their introduction to a special issue of *The Journal of Cultural and Literary Disability Studies*, Clare Barker and Stuart Murray write in a similar vein:

Instead of imposing a hegemonic model of disability, then, and assuming that disability will function in comparable ways across disparate cultural texts and contexts, contemporary materialist postcolonial criticism gives us the tools to take particular, situated experiences as

the starting point for disability analysis, enabling acts of criticism *emerging from and informed by* (rather than applied to) ‘cultural locatedness’ in the first instance.¹⁰⁶

Barker and Murray cite anthropologists Benedicte Ingstad and Susan Reynolds’ desire to orient disability research “in the direction of greater differentiation and specificity,” and rightfully critique disability studies’ mainstream forays into “cultural location” as working mostly to call for further work, rather than actually proliferating readings.¹⁰⁷ This chapter hopes to join the “detailed analyses” of Barker and Murray’s collection to “correct the conditional frame of such gestures.”¹⁰⁸

This chapter takes up the task of learning, from an imaginative work set in the context of American slavery and its immediate aftermath, the possible ways that disability moves and means, but it is also interested in what kind of value is produced for disability by *Beloved* and Denver’s particular situations, and by the text’s narration. That is, what kind of intervention do *Beloved*’s disabilities make into disability studies’ project—most explicitly articulated in Alison Kafer’s *Feminist, Queer, Crip*—of carving out spaces and projecting futures where disability is desirable? To write about *Beloved* is to consider disabilities that are organized around a very thin membrane between the living and the dead in a cultural field where activists must constantly defend against sentiments like *one might as well be dead if one is disabled*, or against scenes like the one Kafer describes in her book’s introduction, when a fellow rehab patient stops her in the hall to recommend suicide. Kafer writes (parenthetically as if to contain its violence), “(his son, he noted offhandedly, knew to ‘let him go’ if he was eventually unable to walk).”¹⁰⁹ Such sentiments, along with the sentiments that undergird forced sterilization or selective abortion, imagine disabled people as the (perhaps not quite) walking dead; or if they are pregnant, this logic understands them as pregnant with life that won’t be life.

¹⁰⁶ Clare Barker and Stuart Murray, “Disabling Postcolonialism: Global Disability Cultures and Democratic Criticism,” *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* 4.3 (2010): 228.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 226.

¹⁰⁹ Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 1.

The logic of *Beloved's* refusal to condemn Sethe's "rough choice" might seem to rhyme with eugenic logics mobilized against disabled people: Sethe murders her baby to prevent her subjection to a life not worth living. *Beloved* holds together the Misery as something actually like a mercy killing in the face of so much injury, and as something that continues white-perpetrated violence, severing the nurturing link between generations that was a miracle in the first place. Thus, among other things, *Beloved* explores the way the injury to the family line is animated by the rock-and-hard-place circumstances of racial slavery and property status, for generations.¹¹⁰

Disability as Racialized Injury

Disability as traumatic wounds, physical and mental, are common in the black community living on and around 124 Bluestone Road. Flesh bears the marks of beatings, knives, brands, whips, restraints; brains reorganize around experiences that were too much to process.¹¹¹ When Sethe escapes to Bluestone Road, a woman cries continually into the food she prepares; Sethe's memory roves around to an Aunt Phyllis who "slept with her eyes wide open[...and a Jackson Till who] slept under the bed"(97). Baby Suggs, Sethe's mother in law, "hurt her hip in Carolina [and] jerked like a three-legged dog"(139).

In most cases, disability is acquired as racialized injury, the result of being subjected to violence under American slavery, and institution authorized by racist ideology. Baby's disability is

¹¹⁰ Besides a choice that's not a choice, the appeal of death has to do with suturing Sethe's own broken kinship system: she explains to Beloved that she intended "to take us all to the other side where my own ma'am is"(203).

¹¹¹ I am considering scars as disability insofar as they are non-normative versions of skin, though they do not always predictably impair day-to-day function. They are often designated as aesthetic disabilities, and more than that, for *Beloved's* narrative, focused as it is on touch, their difference from unscarred skin is narratively significant: "[Sethe] knew, but could not feel, that [Paul D's] cheek was pressing into the branches of her chokecherry tree"(17). They involve a sensory shift from normate skin. What's more, when exposed (privately or publicly), scars are legible in ways that unscarred skin is not. They are a classic signifier of villainy, for example, or they intervene in the social as signs of outsider status or injury, sustained (consider stigmata, outlaw branding, Paul D's, "aw, Lord, girl"(17), and the slap Sethe receives for wanting to be branded as property).

typical, the result of being used up as a commodity: etiologically speaking, “field work [...]broke her hip,” and chronic pain (“her hip hurt every single day”) meant exhaustion: as her son Halle noticed, “to get in and out of bed, she had to lift her thigh with both hands”(139). As a preacher, Baby Suggs ministers to others who had experienced slavery’s terrible and ordinary violence in an outside to the outside of slavery, the Clearing in the woods of a free state, just north of the Ohio River. “Every black man, woman and child who could make it through” came for her body work (laughter, dancing, weeping) and her body-centered redemption message. Baby Suggs reasons that “because slave life had ‘busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tongue,’” she had nothing left to work with but her heart. She speaks:

Yonder they do not love your flesh.[...] They don’t love your eyes; they’d just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty [...]And no they ain’t in love with your mouth. Yonder, out there, they will see it broken and break it again [...]No, they don’t love your mouth. *You* got to love it. This is flesh I’m talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved. [...]And O my people, out yonder, hear me, they do not love your neck unnoosed and straight. So love your neck; put a hand on it, grace it, stroke it and hold it up. And all your inside parts that they’d just as soon slop for hogs, you got to love them. The dark, dark, liver—love it, love it, and the beat and beating heart, love that too. More than eyes or feet. More than lungs that have yet to draw free air. More than your life-holding womb and life-giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. (88-89)

This sermon frames injury, slavery, and liberation as a matter of love, and at the crescendo, it asks Baby Suggs’s people to tend to and sustain an injured and ongoing “beat and beating” heart above all else, even beyond the life-making of reproduction and generations. Baby stops and continues her sermon by “danc[ing] with her twisted hip the rest of what her heart had to say,” a kind of salvific continuation that the revenant Beloved later repeats in her habit of dancing around rooms. Baby Suggs’s last un-busted flesh, according to the narrative, is destroyed with the episode the book calls The Misery: ““Those white things [...] broke my heart strings too.’[...] Her faith, her love, her imagination and her great big old heart began to collapse twenty-eight days after her daughter-in-law arrived”(89). Racialized injury under slavery becomes harm unto death when Sethe kills her

daughter, and this set of cause-effect relationships frames the Misery not as a sin of the mother, but as yet another white-perpetrated, racialized injury—the final blow.

Baby Suggs's gospel names a number of the other disabilities in the novel, and as Barker and Murray have pointed out, the experience of such injuries is ordinary in the context of colonial subjection. Sethe is flogged and “has a tree on [her] back,” a welter of marks that Amy Denver, the woman Sethe encounters on her escape, calls “a chokecherry tree”(79). Sethe's mother had a scar, too: on her rib, under her breast, “a circle and a cross burnt right in the skin”(61). When Sethe realizes that Beloved is her daughter, a whole flood of thoughts and memories include the way her mother perpetually smiled because she'd “had the bit so many times”(203); when Paul D tells Sethe he had a bit in his mouth, she's familiar, “already [knowing] about it, [having] seen it time after time in the place before Sweet Home,” remembering the wildness it elicited and the goose fat people rubbed on their mouth in attempts to soothe. Other disabilities are acquired by different means, but are no less the product of slavery as systematized violence: when another of the Sweet Home men, Sixo, meets his lover, he pierces her ankle so that she can claim a snakebite and avoid the flogging she would get for arriving late to the fields. Halle is “broke[n] like a twig” by what he witnesses when the nephews pin Sethe down and steal her milk, psychic injury that leaves him “sitting by the churn [...with] butter all over his face”(69). Sethe's own “devious” brain suddenly rolls out intense visions of Sweet Home that “never looked as terrible as it was” when she is doing and thinking about other things or nothing at all(6), and her thoughts are otherwise shaped into drifts and shaped by intrusions.

The two sustained readings of *Beloved* coming out of literary disability studies thus understandably focus on the novel's central disabled black women, the caregivers. Both readings, by Rosemarie Garland Thomson and Ato Quayson, attend to how Morrison's novels produce specifically black cultural attitudes toward disability that move outside of more mainstream

American cultural logics of pity and disgust, inspiration and hagiolatry. In her reading of Baby Suggs, Sethe, and Nanthe amputee wetnurse from Sethe's childhood, Rosemarie Garland Thomson argues that disabled black female characters function as an "anti-assimilationist, politicized rhetoric of difference [...] offer[ing] an African-American female self grounded in the singular body that bears the etchings of history and whose validation, power, and identity derive from physical difference and the resistance to cultural norms."¹¹² Their bodies, she argues, "*re-member*: they recall and constitute history and community," bearing witness to great injury and bearing the labor of care and nurture. Ato Quayson's reading of *Beloved* also limits itself to Sethe and Baby Suggs; in keeping with his overall argument that the presence of disability creates "aesthetic nervousness," irrupting formally in a text's narration. Quayson's reading of *Beloved* argues that when the shifting narration clings to the consciousness of physically disabled characters, particularly the mothers, the past bursts into the present as epiphanies. Quayson makes a great deal of the fact that when attached to disabled mothers, these epiphanies are negative, serving to "generate disjuncture and fragmentation" as opposed to the expected "sense of integration or wholeness."¹¹³ Thus, he argues, physically disabled mother characters are accompanied by narrative form that is interrupted, such that physical disabilities act as the "discursive markers of a crisis of representation" that Quayson aligns with the novel's insistence on ethical impasse.

Garland Thomson and Quayson have given disability studies two arguments that say something about disability's potential to mean multivalently and its potential to shape a narrative beyond "sociological"¹¹⁴ representations of human kinds, spilling over into form. Both theses,

¹¹² Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 105.

¹¹³ Ato Quayson, *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 110.

¹¹⁴ Quayson's word.

though, in stipulating organizing strong theoretical patterns that best apply to Baby Suggs and Sethe, don't explain a great number of the other cases *Beloved* takes care to present. Garland Thomson's readings, though convincing, don't account for the many other bodies and minds that are touched by slavery's violence without necessarily taking up the redemptive work of caretaking and nurturance.¹¹⁵ This is especially true for Beloved's and Denver's bodies, which aren't touched by slavery's violence in the same way, though they bear the marks. Likewise, while I agree with Quayson that "disability enters [Morrison's] text both as an image and a highly complex ethical force field," and again that there *are* remarkable formal moments when Sethe experiences surges of previously inaccessible memory, pasts sutured into presents, I have a number of objections to Quayson's reading. First, I don't think the book's formal intensifications all correspond to physically disabled mothers. In one distinctive scene, the narration slips into the present tense while Denver and Beloved are keeping each other company and go to the cold house to get cider, where Beloved disappears, much to Denver's devastation, and then reappears (120–124). Second, although Quayson counts it among the novel's negative epiphanies, the narration of the Misery isn't properly speaking epiphanic: as readers, we are indeed finally getting an account of the event itself, but it is not an event that bursts onto the scene in a formally distinctive way, and the narration clings not only to the perspective of the physically disabled mother, Baby Suggs, but also to Schoolteacher's. Third, Quayson's reading presumes *physically disabled* motherhood to be particularly attached to violence in the novel, and the logic appears to be that physically disabled mothers in particular cause the narrative to tremble with the ethical impossibilities wrought by slavery: Baby Suggs and Sethe are both physically disabled, and both have affectionately or murderously discarded their young, and

¹¹⁵ Likewise, her arguments leave to the side examples of infanticide or neglect that don't as much hold together a great contradiction (deep maternal love and murder), as they do for Sethe when she slits her baby's throat.

correspondingly, negative epiphany is induced in the form. But Ella, a woman in the community who has no physical disabilities nor any epiphanic moments, has also committed infanticide by neglect when she gives birth to “a hairy white thing” and refuses to nurse (258–9).

In arguing that *Beloved*'s physically disabled, ethically-ambiguous mothers correspond to formal surges that only serve to break down any narrative or ethical resolution, Quayson's book skips a bit too quickly over instances in the text that are not organized by his thesis. Like Garland Thomson's *Extraordinary Bodies*, it also neglects two characters, Denver and Beloved, who have disabilities that are not as directly acquired as the other disabilities that populate Morrison's novel. Denver and Beloved's disabilities respond not to overwork, to bits and whips, rape, starvation, or to the terror living with such violence produces. Instead, *Beloved* narrates a supernatural return with strange skin, a low voice, thirst, hunger, and a scar; and deafness that comes and goes in ways that are calibrated to a ghost's transformations.

If we attend to the narration of Denver's changing embodiment and changing relationship to her family's injury, we find that there's more there than strange supernatural disturbances. Taken together, the relations proposed by the novel for Denver's disability expand beyond the impact of her deafness' onset, instead expressing an injury, acquired and there all along, to her family structure. *The time is out of joint*—she and her family are haunted—on the level of lineage. When Sethe escapes from Sweet Home, she has been brutally beaten and she is pregnant with Denver, whose later deafness is wrapped up in the particular metaphysics of *Beloved*, ones that show themselves most where Beloved the revenant is concerned. Denver goes deaf for two years, but careful attention to the narrative's descriptions of her deafness show that it is not only caused by greater contact with injury at the level of lineage—her lost father, her murdered sister—but also that it comes with a battery of non-normative modes of sensation and attention. In the next section this chapter tracks how Denver inhabits her particular embodiment and its attunements in the face of such injury

across distinct phases. These include a period of withdrawal and self-sustenance that begins with her deafness and lasts until Beloved appears as a revenant; one of hypervigilant attention to Beloved's presence, waiting to be beheld; and one of waiting *on* her mother and sister, giving life in ways that resonate with her inheritance—communion with her lost father and her dead grandmother.

Denver's Deafness and the Hurt of the Hurt World

From the start, Denver has been tied to weird life, haunting—and perhaps more importantly than that, to lost tiers of her family tree. On her escape, Sethe is situated just to one side of a number of in-betweens: near the banks of the Ohio River, she is in-between Sweet Home and 124 Bluestone Road, and she is in-between a slave state and free state, Kentucky and Ohio. More significantly, with swollen feet and “her back pulped,” hungry with “clanging in her head,” she spends a day and a night alive, on the brink of death. Denver, inside Sethe's body, shares her situation between life and death; it may be appropriate to say that in the oft repeated story of her “magical birth,” Denver is Sethe's first experience with haunting and possession, where Sethe's body is animated by Denver's life.¹¹⁶ On her way to the riverside, Sethe's motion trades off with Denver's: “...she could not, would not stop, for when she did the little antelope rammed her with horns and pawed the ground of her womb with impatient hooves. While she was walking, it seemed to graze, quietly.” Finally, Sethe sinks to the ground, horizontal, prone like a corpse: “Nothing was alive but her nipples and the little antelope”(30). As she waits for death or the antelope's protest, she makes a connection between her metaphor for the life in her womb and one of the precious few acquaintances she had with her own mother, who was a distant hat in a field, an unknown woman

¹¹⁶ Pregnancy represents a state in which the distinction between one's own life and animation and the life of another blurs. Could pregnancy—and this journey—be understood helpfully as a being haunted by the future? Sethe is also preoccupied with the need to deliver her milk to the children already in Ohio.

with a bit-written smile. Specifically, Sethe remembers her mother dancing the antelope¹¹⁷ with other enslaved people, a group of bodies that “shifted shapes and became something other. Some unchained, demanding other whose feet knew her pulse better than she did”(31). As Denver is on the threshold of coming into the world, and Sethe is on the threshold of leaving it, this memory connects the generations, and that connection between Denver and her lineage is a resistant way of moving that contains, is animated by, some liminal, unknown “unchained” other, life not bound to death.

Later, when she is eight years old, Denver suddenly goes deaf. The scattered bits and pieces of the novel’s narrative that mention it are brief. When it is most directly narrated, Denver’s deafness seems to be a rather open and shut matter: her hearing is “cut off by an answer she could not bear to hear, cut on by the sound of her dead sister trying to climb the stairs”(103). It’s likely that much of the literature on *Beloved* has skipped over Denver’s two-year deafness because its origin seems explainable as a traumatic response to knowledge of the Misery, and its ending, one of the novel’s supernatural events, a ripple in the supernatural made by Sethe’s terrible murder. Indeed, the text writes Denver’s deafness as acquired via traumatic audition (an answer she could not bear to hear). It’s tied to the resurgence of a traumatic memory that surfaces when a schoolmate asks questions about her mother’s action: “Murder, Nelson Lord had said. ‘Didn’t your mother get locked away for murder? Wasn’t you in there with her when she went?’”(104). We learn:

But the thing that leapt up in her when he asked it was a thing that had been lying there all along.[...] certain odd and terrifying feelings about her mother were collecting around the thing that leapt up inside her.[...] Even when she did not muster the courage to ask Nelson Lord’s question, she could not hear Sethe’s answer, nor Baby Suggs’ words, nor anything at all thereafter. [...] The thing that leapt up had been coiled in just such a place [the “in there”

¹¹⁷ It’s also worth noting that this is an instance of resistant animal-related language, which elsewhere in the novel has ties to the ultimate violence of being interpellated as less-than-human; Sethe has just experienced the injury that made her husband go mad, in which she was pinned down and “milked” by the Schoolmaster’s nephews, who had been cataloguing her “animal characteristics.”

of being “locked away” in Nelson Lord’s question]: a darkness, a stone, and some other thing that moved by itself. She went deaf rather than hear the answer. (102–105)

But as the narrative tells us about how Denver’s hearing is cut on and cut off, the picture is larger than a child processing a traumatic memory. We read, “The return of Denver’s hearing, cut off by an answer she could not bear to hear, cut on by the sound of her dead sister trying to climb the stairs, signaled another shift in the fortunes of the people of 124. From then on the presence was full of spite”(103–104). If we follow the thought gathering at the end of this sentence, and if we more adequately attend to the end of Denver’s deafness (which coincides with the “close thunder” of the baby ghost crawling the stairs [103]), we begin to see that a psychosomatic response to traumatic knowledge doesn’t explain things.

Nor is Denver’s deafness merely supernatural, an incidental after-effect of the Misery and its aura of hauntedness, as the direct narration of its ending might suggest. It’s more accurate to understand Denver’s memory and her deafness as realizing something specific, the injury that the lineage sustains. Denver’s deafness is best understood, that is, as a sensory re-organization that responds to that injury, and her hearing disability can’t be separated from a series of other effects that come with it. The memory that leaps up inside her and causes deafness, a memory that was there all along, refers to two violences. First, the “darkness, a stone, and some other thing that moved by itself” is her dim experience as an infant in the jail cell with Sethe, thus referring to the Misery and its circumstances: an ideological system that treats human bodies as property with only a tenuous and incomplete legal claim to personhood. This basic and violent denial underwrites the rape and forced pregnancies, the families separated without warning, and the compromised familial attachments (not allowing oneself to love one’s children), not to mention infanticide fueled by rage or love. The jail memory is one of continuing to be nourished and cared for by the mother who has just killed her sister. The darkness, stone, and things moving—a memory that had been there all along—also resonate with memories Beloved has of the slave ship on the Middle Passage. Thus the

circumstances of Denver's disability temporally straddle the sudden onset of acquired disability *and* insist on an origin that stretches back much further. Denver's disability, "cut on" by knowledge of the Misery and the dark-space memory, is not just deafness, but a sensory re-organization.

Denver's traumatic memory sets off a greater and more complex chain of events: with the sensory re-organization, the deafness itself has effects, shifting Denver's attention to the baby's ghost and to Halle. And each of these shifts—in attention, behavior, and attunement to what is present in the world of the novel—become pieces of time in particular ways. Denver's memory of lineage-injury and her resulting sense-shifts interact with *Beloved*, with haunting, to generate eras or phases. In the process, Denver inhabits a mode of being-with injury that makes a distinction between the hurt of injury and the variation it produces: there are breaks and continuations with a hobble. It is not that Denver overcomes or manages to erase the injuries her body is registering, but she does manage to reparatively¹¹⁸ continue on.

With and Beyond Deafness: Shifts in Sensation and Attention

Morrison's supernatural aesthetic draws from Africanist and indigenous American traditions of the spirit world, as well as from women's traditions of the gothic. As a number of critics have worked to show, these traditions figure the supernatural not as something radically other to the natural, but rather as an extension of the perceptible ordinary, the paranormal. Denver's deafness, the narrative tells us, is a silence "too thick for penetration [...that] gave her eyes a power even she found hard to believe. The black nostrils of a sparrow sitting on a branch sixty feet above her head, for example"(105). Justine Tally connects this detail to Denver's status as a "charmed child," reading

¹¹⁸ I'm thinking here, of Sedgwick's account of reparativity, that of gathering part-objects to forge a nourishing, sustaining plenitude: "The desire of a reparative impulse, on the other hand, is additive and accretive. Its fear, a realistic one, is that the culture surrounding it is inadequate or inimical to its nurture; it wants to assemble and confer plenitude on an object that will then have resources to offer to an inchoate self"(149). See *Touching Feeling* (Durham, NC: Duke, 2003).

her as the figure by which “Morrison capitalizes on” 19th century philosophies of suprasensation. Suprasensation names “the idea that just as there are sounds that the human ear cannot hear, there is a threshold though[sic] which physical, natural phenomena must pass in order to be perceived by human beings.”¹¹⁹ William James developed such ideas to account for human seers and the occult: “[i]n the psychic spectrum the ‘ultra’ parts may embrace a far wider range, both of physiological and of psychical activity, than is open to our ordinary consciousness and memory.”¹²⁰ Tally’s account of Denver’s intensified vision as suprasensation connects it to a greater attunement to the spirit world: Denver is uniquely able to recognize Beloved as her sister and see the white dress embracing her mother even years after her hearing returns. Tally also helpfully points out that it is only in the narration that cleaves close to Denver’s perspective that the narrative witnesses Beloved’s “otherworldliness,” as when she disappears from the cold house. Denver is also present, I would add, as the sole witness of Beloved’s unusual sickness when she arrives, and of the scene where Beloved’s tooth falls out and she fears her body is falling apart (54; 133–34).

One of the suprasensational effects of Denver’s temporary deafness is that she has access to presences from “the other side”: she can hear her sister’s breathing though she hears nothing else. While the sharpening of her vision is indiscriminate, this coextensive ability to hear her sister’s ghost is more particularly focused on the on-going life of her lost family members. She narrates, “All I could hear was me breathing but sometimes in the day I couldn’t tell if it was me breathing or somebody next to me[...],” repeating, “it got quiet and all I could hear was my own breathing and one other who knocked over the milk jug while it was sitting on the table”(207, 208). As part of the sensory re-organization and greater access to presences from “the other side,” Denver’s deafness is narrated as shifting her attention, too, turning her toward the breaks, the absences, in her family

¹¹⁹ Justine Tally, *Toni Morrison’s Beloved: Origins* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 61.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 62.

structure: her sister and her father. At first, her greater attunement to her sister is explained as a response to the new-found feelings she has about her mother, and then her deafness transforms that attention to interaction. When she remembers her time in jail as an infant with Sethe and feelings of fear gathered themselves around that memory, Denver starts having nightmares every night. In these dreams, her mother cuts off her head and then carries it downstairs to comb and braid her hair in a routine act of maternal care. These “monstrous and unmanageable dreams about Sethe found release in the concentration Denver began to fix on the baby ghost.[...] Now it held for her all the anger, love and fear she didn’t know what to do with.[...] [L]ike the little four o’clocks that searched openly for sunlight, then closed themselves tightly when it left, Denver kept watch for the baby and withdrew from everything else”(103, 105). In her first-person narrative, she elaborates that the quiet, specifically, “Made me have to read faces and learn how to figure out what people were thinking, so I didn’t need to hear what they said. That’s how come me and Beloved could play together. Not talking. On the porch. By the creek. In the secret house”(206). And again, describing the quiet: “That was when everybody was quiet and I couldn’t hear anything they said. I didn’t care either because the quiet let me dream my daddy better. I always knew he was coming. Something was holding him up.[...] He was coming and it was a secret”(207). That deafness, its quiet, directly orients her toward her sister as playmate and her father as arrivant. Denver’s disability not only has its etiology in an injury sustained by her family’s lineage, but it also expresses that disability as acquired. And because of that particular family-injury’s context in a much larger system of violence against kinship systems, its status as acquired disability (non-disabled, whole, or “normate” shifting to now disabled), it is better understood as what we might call trans-ability, a continuing-out-of-joint, for that family lineage.¹²¹

¹²¹ “Trans-ability” is a term that attempts to mobilize the “through” as well as the “across” meanings of the prefix *trans*-. I have attempted to distinguish this term from *transability* with a perhaps too-

Era Shifts: The Original Hunger

Gathering up the pieces of Denver's disability, one also finds a repeated characterization of the deafness phase as "the old hunger," or "the original hunger," which is associated with the "secrets" that the narrative uses to introduce Denver. Denver's introduction is bound up with the site of those secrets and the site of that hunger, an outdoor room created by five large boxwoods planted in a circle. As this hunger's characterization as *past* suggests, in order to track Denver's disability, one must think in terms of shifts in era (in a nevertheless continuous duration of time). For about a year before being presented with Nelson Lord's question, Denver had been going to the lessons in reading and writing that a neighborhood woman, Lady Jones, offered at her house. With the question comes the first era-shift: at age eight, she goes deaf, begins having nightmares, withdraws, and attends to the baby ghost. The two-year era of her deafness ends with another shift when Denver is ten years old and she hears the baby crawling up the stairs and the ghost turns spiteful. Though soon afterward, Grandma Baby dies and her brothers run away, these events don't organize Denver's timeline. Beloved's return as a "fully-dressed woman...gain[ing] the dry bank" does, marking the end of the "original hunger."

Although Denver's deafness is the most remarkable effect of Nelson Lord's question, this accompanying hunger is its most lasting. The original hunger's connection to Denver's deafness, along with the narration's passing characterization of Denver as fat, prompts a closer look. When she first appears at the beginning of the novel, Denver is described as "round and brown," and Sethe jokes that Denver is still "pushing out the front of her dress, "provided she can get in it"(11).

subtle hyphenation. Transability, as Bethany Stevens has helped explain, is also a term of self-identification, used by people with nondisabled embodiments who have a "the need or desire to transition from supposed binary states of physical ability to physical disability." See Bethany Stevens, "Interrogating Transability: A Catalyst to View Disability as Body Art," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 31, no. 4 (2011), <http://dx.doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v31i4.1705>.

This association of Denver's fatness with Sethe's pregnancy, along with its evocation in Denver's "far too womanly breasts" when she bursts into tears, calibrates Denver's fatness to matters of reproduction, generation: her fatness' excess is attached not to physical food but to the original hunger that she has been sustaining herself with for nearly ten years, in the period between her deafness' onset and Beloved's return.

The original, or old, hunger is almost always referenced from a position of being with Beloved, the revenant, and not only is it past, but Beloved's presence is always narrated as preferable. In one articulation, Denver describes the pleasures of looking at Beloved, even if Beloved did not reliably devote her attention to Denver: "It was better to feast, to have permission to be the looker, because the old hunger—the before-Beloved hunger that drove her into boxwood and cologne for just a taste of life, to feel it bumpy and not flat—was out of the question"(119–120). The passing reference to the original hunger here specifies the nature of the hunger and focuses on the food that managed to satisfy it until Beloved's return: a poverty of liveness that Denver's activities in the boxwood room somehow mitigate.

But despite Denver's insistence, in Beloved's presence, that this period of being driven and self-nourishment is itself impoverished, careful reading shows that the original hunger does sustain Denver, and this sustenance is particularly connected to her greater attunement to her missing family members and to her grandmother's gospels of resistance. When the novel's narration first cleaves to Denver's consciousness, we get the only reference to the hunger as a present occupation. In this passage, it is presented in connection to secrets and location, the boxwood to which Denver is driven by her need for a "taste of life." "Denver's secrets were sweet," we're told, "accompanied every time by wild veronica until she discovered cologne"(28). The emphasis on secrets put her activities in the boxwood room in a network of pieces that involve Denver's shifted attention toward the missing members of her family, her sister and her father. As she explains that the quiet

helps her dream her daddy better, his pending arrival is one of the sweet secrets named here: “He was coming and it was a secret”(207). And she and her sister play together around 124 Bluestone Road, including “in the secret house”(207). “Ever since I was little,” Denver narrates, “she was my company and she helped me wait for my daddy”(205). In the chapter that describes the boxwood room, we learn:

It began as a little girl’s houseplay, but as her desires changed, so did the play. [...] First a playroom (where the silence was softer), then a refuge (from her brothers’ fright), soon the place became the point. In that bower, closed off from the hurt of the hurt world, Denver’s imagination produced its own hunger and its own food, which she badly needed because loneliness wore her out. *Wore her out*. Veiled and protected by the live green walls, she felt ripe and clear, and salvation was as easy as a wish.(28)

These attunements to her sister and her father, facilitated as they are by Denver’s deafness and sensory re-organization, are the “salvation” that’s as “easy as a wish,” generated in response to loneliness that’s figured as an individual exhaustion injury that echoes the more systemic being-worn-out expressed by Baby Suggs when she takes to bed after the Misery: “After sixty years of losing children to the people who chewed up her life and spit it out like a fish bone; [...]well, it could wear out even a Baby Suggs, holy”(177). Denver’s hunger is an exhaustion that she experiences more locally as deprivation from the company of others—her father, certainly, but also her contact with the community around 124 Bluestone Road and the children at Lady Jones’s house. This rupture in contact, soothed by Denver’s time in the shelter of five trees (note that her nuclear family consists of five people besides Denver), was perpetrated by her mother’s injury to her family tree, in turn perpetrated by “the thing that happened that made it all right for my mother to kill my sister[...]Whatever it is, it comes from outside this house, outside the yard, and it can come right on in the yard if it wants to”(205). Baby Suggs’ being worn out is wiser to the “whatever it is”: the white people who took her children from her and consumed her life for their own sustenance. Though Denver’s mean-time understanding is not as in touch with racial violence on a larger scale, her body registers Baby Suggs’ understanding, as does the salvation-food she imaginatively produces.

Soon after, in a passage that seems to be just about the changing weather, we learn more about this imaginative food, and how “as her desires changed, so did the play.”¹²² The narrative reveals obliquely that her efforts to get “just a taste of life” involve not just cologne or wild veronica but also nudity and self-pleasure. We read, “Once when she was in the boxwood,[...] she was made suddenly cold by a combination of wind and the perfume on her skin. She dressed herself, bent down to leave and stood up in snowfall”(29). One reading of what is described here might suggest that the object is sensory intensification, in which the “bumpy” taste of life that she seeks is the touch of air on naked skin. This may be the case, but by association it’s specifically attached to Baby Suggs’ teachings about self-love and sexual enjoyment, self-pleasure as resistance to slavery’s assaults on kinship systems. Suggestively, as Denver narrates this lesson in the first person later in the novel, she immediately shifts the subject to the boxwood room. Denver recounts Baby’s gospel:

Grandma Baby said people look down on her because she had eight children with different men. Coloredpeople and whitepeople both look down on her for that. Slaves not supposed to have pleasurable feelings on their own; their bodies not supposed to be like that, but they have to have as many children as they can to please whoever owned them. Still, they were not supposed to have pleasure deep down. She said for me not to listen to all that. That I should always listen to my body and love it.
The secret house. When she died I went there. (209)

In the secret house, Denver is “on [her] own,” lonely, but she engages in rituals of anointing her skin with perfume and exposing it to the air. Based on the description’s intercalation of Denver’s occupations with rabbits—animals associated with fecundity—“thrilled” and then “confused” by the “signal” she’s sending out, Denver is indeed listening to her body and loving it, in a way that is

¹²² The narrative characterizes Sethe’s relationship to the baby ghost as taking it for granted, like the weather; and at the very end of the novel, “just weather” is what remains when “all trace [of Beloved the revenant] is gone,” and in forgetting, the “breath of the disremembered and unaccounted for, clamoring] for a kiss” is just wind. So the weather here, particularly the touch of wind, is associated with the remnants—the continued presence—of lost human beings (which we are at pains to recognize as such).

divorced from the reproductive capacities that had been so destructively harnessed by property relations under slavery.

Denver is driven to the boxwood by an epiphany about the impossibility of avowing her complex feelings for her mother. This injury, one of lineage, is expressed as deafness and a greater access to the visual field and the supernatural one. As this injury reshapes the reach of Denver's world, keeping her in the yard, dampening her communications with her living family members, it also inaugurates a period of waiting in which Denver learns a response to her family's hauntedness unlike her community's, her brothers', grandmother's, mother's. The community assumed "that the haunting was done by an evil thing looking for more. None of them knew the downright pleasure of enchantment, of not suspecting but knowing the things behind things. Her brothers had known, but it scared them; Grandma Baby knew, but it saddened her. None could appreciate the safety of ghost company. Even Sethe didn't love it. She just took it for granted—like a sudden change in the weather"(37). Denver's access to her father is obliterated by slavery as a system, and specifically because her father has been utterly broken (vanished, not even confirmed dead) by witnessing his family's fundamentally injured state: their status as property to be used and moved at the whim of white others, through a heart- and mind-breaking scene in which Sethe's life-giving milk is stolen from her and from their children. Denver's attachment to her baby sister functions differently because of her particular mode of attunement to her sister's continued presence in the world of 124 Bluestone Road: for Denver, when her sensorium reshapes to her fuller contact with her family's deep injury via memory of the jail cell/Middle Passage, her sister is very present; in fact, she provides company. As her sexuality is budding, as she is living on and extending her family tree, Denver sustains herself with enjoying the ghost's company, play, self-pleasure, and dreaming of reunification with her father.

After the Original Hunger: Beloved as Secret

Still, in Beloved's presence, the Denver-inflected narrative insists on this original hunger as something that must never be returned to, telegraphing a sense of desperation about losing Beloved. These articulations offer a sense of the era Denver is inhabiting in the time after Beloved's arrival but before anyone else grasps who Beloved is. Denver's secret—that Beloved is her sister—is delicious but perhaps not sweet, a mode of inhabiting her family's lineage injury in a phase beyond her deafness and its accompanying sensory re-organization. In one particular chapter, we get a series of articulations of the original hunger that shed light on how Denver understands the phase when the revenant replaces the boxwood bower: the narration shifts to the present tense as Denver is enjoying the Beloved's company, and Beloved disappears from the cold house, just like that, much to Denver's dismay.

At the outset, we first encounter Denver's sense of Beloved's presence: "To go back to the original hunger was impossible. Luckily for Denver, looking was food enough to last. But to be looked at in turn was beyond appetite: it was breaking through her own skin to a place where hunger hadn't been discovered"(118). The chapter circles back to Denver's desire to remain suspended in Beloved's presence:

For anything is better than the original hunger—the time when, after a year of the wonderful little i, sentences rolling out like pie dough and the company of other children, there was no sound coming through. Anything is better than the silence when she answered to hands gesturing and was indifferent to the movement of lips. When she saw every little thing and colors leaped smoldering into view. She will forgo the most violent of sunsets, stars as fat as dinner plates and all the blood of autumn and settle for the palest yellow if it comes from her Beloved.(122)

This second description periodizes the original hunger with respect to what came even before Denver's deafness, and it is directly attached to the economy of hearing and vision that accompanied the shift into the old hunger: the deafness that enabled her communion with ghosts is here experienced as a loss, something that interrupted her communion with other people. This second description recapitulates the deprivations that Denver was trying to satisfy in the boxwood bower in

terms of isolation, but it also specifically marks the period before Nelson Lord's question as a pre-disability, pre-suprasensational repleteness and proximity to her father when it highlights losing community with other children and the "pie-dough" sustenance of the lessons, as well as the small independence they afforded. That is, the original hunger begins with the loss of the "wonderful little *i*," which both points to how the lessons resulted from Denver's first independent ventures from the house at 124 Bluestone Road as well as her mastery of writing.

Building on Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s work on slave narratives, Gordon has noted that because writing is aligned with the rational discourse that was used to justify slavery, Sethe is deeply suspicious of writing. It has done little but harm to her life: Schoolteacher's pseudo-scientific book—for which Sethe makes the ink—presumes to catalogue the non-human characteristics of black people; the newspaper article that only deigns to represent her for her "rough choice" during the Misery ("there was no way in hell a black face could appear in a newspaper if the story was about something anybody wanted to hear"[155]); seven letters chipped into pink stone (*Beloved*) render part of the Church's funeral liturgy, *Dearly Beloved*, but only after Sethe pays for it by allowing the engraver to force himself on her for ten minutes while his young son watches, "the anger in his face so old"(5). Halle, on the other hand, and Denver after him, feel empowered by writing: "He could count on paper. The boss taught him. Offered to teach the other boys but only my daddy wanted it. She said the other boys said no.[...] But my daddy said, If you can't count they can cheat you. If you can't read they can beat you"(208). When she loses the experience of little *i*'s, expertly executed, Denver is losing access to the power-knowledge used elsewhere against her and her family; and to her father, who shared her practical/self-protective belief that she could tap into that power herself. The *gained*, intense, visual experience of the original hunger phase is ambivalently described, attached as it is to blood and violence, but it is also figured as something that Denver did treasure (is willing to forgo). The color, palest yellow, that—coming from *Beloved*—would be much better than all of

this vividness, is the color of breast milk, which again suggests that Denver's hunger craves *kinship*, reproductive nurture, wholeness of lineage.

These textures for Denver's deafness/waiting phase, the loss that overlays scenes of dreaming and self-pleasure, tell us that the delight and sustenance she was deriving from Mrs. Jones's lessons come from an already-there sense of her family's injury (her father's absence, and the poverty of company after the Misery), even before Nelson Lord's question prompts the memories and knowledge that produce a break, inaugurating the phase of deafness, suprasensation, and Denver's ways of inhabiting them. When Beloved appears, "all fleshy and real," she reorganizes the original hunger that's been occupying Denver for so long, serving as replacement. This shift, for all the loveliness of Beloved's presence, is not a mending or a cure for the lineage-level injury Denver's disability expresses: disability is neither coming nor going, it's taking on another phase. As the narrative characterizes Denver's experience of each of these phases, it explicates an out-of-joint lineage injury temporality best described not as acquired disability or congenital disability, but rather as trans-ability. If acquired disability imagines a ray (an origin point, the harm of injury, before which disability is not present), and congenital disability imagines a line (disability stretching infinitely in both directions), *Beloved* imagines a line with breaks, already-experienced injury-harm, whose effects endure and shift into new modes with subsequent, intervening events.

The second description of the original hunger, in asserting Beloved as some more satisfying alternative to the boxwood room, uses language that invites a comparison between these distinct forms of waiting. When Denver went deaf, Denver could hear her sister breathing, and with Beloved's return, there is an emphasis on Beloved's breathing again. Denver is able to breathe *in* Beloved's breath, feel *it* rather than the wind, smell *it* rather than cologne: "Denver will turn toward her [when she sleeps], and if Beloved faces her, she will inhale deeply the sweet air from her mouth. If not she will have to lean up and over her, every once in a while, to catch a sniff. For anything is

better than the original hunger”(121). The sweet secrets of the bower satisfied with cologne and air on bumpy skin, making Denver feel “ripe and clear”; with Beloved, after the original hunger, this is replaced by a complex sensation that includes feeling “soft and bright”(28, 118). When Beloved “looked at Denver with attention,” the experience is one of “breaking through her own skin to a place where hunger hadn’t been discovered”:

It was lovely. Not to be stared at, not seen, but being pulled into view by the interested, uncritical eyes of the other. Having her hair examined as a part of her self, not as a material or a style. Having her lips, nose, chin caressed as they might be if she were a moss rose a gardener paused to admire. Denver’s skin dissolved under that gaze and became soft and bright like the lisle dress that had its arm around her mother’s waist. She floated near but outside her own body, feeling vague and intense at the same time. Needing nothing. Being what there was.(118)

The revenant’s attention gives Denver experiences of completion that she guards jealously and waits for (looking at Beloved has been figured as “food enough to last”). When Beloved gazes at Denver, it is carefully described as an experience of being loved,¹²³ and when air on skin is replaced with breaking *through* skin, this disembodiment and plenitude is associated with the white dress Denver had witnessed sitting with her mother long before Beloved’s arrival, and which she had interpreted to be the baby ghost. Completion and the hunger’s stillness in Beloved’s gaze, then, is an experience that makes Denver coincide with her sister, experiencing liveness in spectral fashion, floating on the other side of the line between the living and the dead. This interaction may be an exchange that pushes Beloved further into the living, into the space of hunger: the narrative continues by telling us that “at such times it seemed to be Beloved that needed something—wanted something. Deep down in her wide black eyes, back behind the expressionlessness, was a palm held out for a penny which Denver would gladly give her, if only she knew how or knew enough about her”(118). Instead of

¹²³ As Giorgio Agamben argues in *The Coming Community*, “the lover wants the loved one *with all of its predicates*, its being such as it is”; love is not directed toward particular features of the loved one, and love doesn’t “neglect the properties in favor of an insipid generality (universal love)”(2).

play and particular access to the presence of a ghost, this phase of being-with a spectre (now embodied) offers the greater contact of sharing her sister's lineage-injury experience of being unmade by love.

Despite Denver's insistence on these moments' deliciousness, her relationship to them is precarious, and makes Denver inhabit a different, hypervigilant kind of waiting, "her mind rac[ing] to something she might do or say to interest and entertain" Beloved. The breastmilk "pale yellow" that Denver would take in lieu of the vivid colors that came with her deafness is a conditional, uncertain sustenance (she would take it "*if* it came from [her] Beloved"). And in this phase of intent orientation toward her sister as lineage-injury, Denver's connection to Beloved is absorbing. When Beloved disappears from the cold house, it is described as a magical coming and going like Denver's deafness. Denver can't breathe and begins to cry: "Just as she thought it might happen, it has. Easy as walking into a room. A magical appearance on a stump, the face wiped out by sunlight, and a magical disappearance in a shed, eaten alive by the dark." The scene continues, "Now she is crying because she has no self. Death is a skipped meal compared to this. She can feel her thickness thinning, dissolving into nothing. She grabs the hair at her temples to get enough to uproot it and halt the melting for a while. Teeth clamped shut, Denver brakes her sobs. She doesn't moved to open the door because there is no world out there. [...] She won't put up with another leaving, another trick"(123). The language here re-mobilizes the language of hunger, radicalizing it so that in the absence of Beloved, Denver wastes away.

Denver's existence easily resumes when Beloved re-appears. This scene, which appears to be isolated, some signifier of the supernatural like the tooth that falls out of Beloved's mouth as she begins to fall apart, anticipates the next phase, when Denver and her mother live with familial injury (Beloved's embodiment as a revenant), a relationship that becomes literal hunger and prompts into

forms of contact with lost family members, her father and her grandmother, and venture out into the world beyond the yard.

Post-Secret: Denver as Her Father's Daughter

In the ultimate denouement of the novel, Sethe recognizes Beloved as the murdered baby, and is consumed by her own intent connection with Beloved, literally shrinking and growing smaller. Though Denver had been Beloved's playmate for ten years, Sethe becomes Beloved's primary company as Denver adopts a position of attending to the play: "At first they played together. A whole month and Denver loved it [...] When it became clear that they were only interested in each other, Denver began to drift from the play, but she watched it, alert for any sign that Beloved was in danger. Finally convinced there was none, and seeing her mother that happy, that smiling—how could it go wrong?—she let down her guard and it did"(240). Denver continues to watch and wait as the interaction devolves: Sethe and Beloved argue and fight over the Misery as Sethe tries to meet Beloved's growing demands. Because Sethe has stopped going to work, the family has no food and is starving under the rule of a literal hunger.

Denver watches and learns in this phase, extending her disability-enabled familiarities with her family's injury: "124 was quiet. Denver, who thought she knew all about silence, was surprised to learn hunger could do that: quiet you down and wear you out"(239). Responding to this literal hunger differently because they do not share Denver's relationship to the lineage injury of the Misery, "Neither Sethe nor Beloved knew or cared about [the silence] one way or another. They were too busy rationing their strength to fight one another. So it was [Denver] who had to step off the edge of the world and die because if she didn't, they all would"(239).

Denver does leave the house to make contact with the community to ask for food and work. The certain death attached to stepping off the edge of the world is "that thing beyond the yard" that made Sethe kill her daughter, as Denver has come to understand the situation over the period of

time from Nelson Lord's question, her first memories of the Misery, and her years of living with their effects. When Denver acts to assuage her family's literal and life-threatening hunger, she does so through her enduring connection to two brokennesses in her family tree, her absent father, and her now dead grandmother.¹²⁴ As she negotiates her first steps out of the yard, Denver accesses her grandmother through memory, and suprasensationally, as a present voice. Just before she died, Denver remembers, Baby Suggs taught her that there's no defense against whitepeople: "they could prowl at will, change from one mind to another, and even when they thought they were behaving, it was a far cry from what real humans did[...]. Lay down your sword. This ain't a battle; it's a rout." As Denver hesitates, though, "Baby Suggs laughed, clear as anything," and speaks to Denver of her father and of disability: "You mean I never told you nothing about Carolina? About your daddy? You don't remember nothing about how come I walk the way I do and about your mother's feet, not to speak of her back? I never told you all that? Is that why you can't walk down the steps? My Jesus my." This message both affirms that there is no defense, and that the response is to "Know it, and go on out the yard. Go on"(244). against more intuitive logics, Baby Suggs's lesson insists that knowing these things—her family's individual, violence-wrought injuries and their continued effects; to know about the plantation before Sweet Home and her father Halle—would enable Denver's excursion, her movement forward.

The food the community brings by the house strengthens Sethe and Beloved for "a doomsday truce designed by the devil"(250), and Denver continues to wait, watch, and wait on them, "washing, cooking, forcing, cajoling her mother to eat a little now and then, providing sweet things for Beloved as often as she could to calm her down"(250). "As Denver's outside life

¹²⁴ I'm imagining a relationship that has a negatively coded medical name: malunion. That is, I'm imagining these connections as breaks (as in a bone) that have fused back together in ways that don't repeat the original structure.

improved [and] her home life deteriorated,” Denver inaugurates an ongoing life for herself through her connection to her father paired with another encounter with Nelson Lord, whose question set her contact with her family injury—and its attendant shifts in sensation— more consciously into motion. “Her father’s daughter after all,” the narrative tells us,

Denver decided to do the necessary[...]She would hire herself somewhere.[...] Somebody had to be saved, but unless Denver got to work, there would be no one to save, no one to come home to, and no Denver, either. It was a new thought, having a self to look out for and preserve. And it might not have occurred to her if she hadn’t met Nelson Lord leaving his grandmother’s house as Denver entered to pay a thank you for half a pie. All he did was smile and say, “Take care of yourself, Denver,” but she heard it as though it were what language was made for. The last time he spoke to her his words blocked up her ears. Now they opened her mind. (252)

The solution is to get help from the Bodwins like Baby Suggs and her mother before her: “why not the third generation as well?” This period, in which Beloved and Sethe are wrapped up in their own relationships to their family’s injury, is a period for Denver of greater understanding, lessons shot through with the remnants of her family’s broken spots and enabled by her particular ways of being-with those spectres that had in turn been enabled by a whole set of shifts dominated by deafness. As Denver ventures out into the world, her interactions with the community ultimately lead the community to gather at 124 Bluestone Road to search with their voices for “the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words” in a wave of sound that re-institutes the healing scene of Baby Suggs’s sermons in the Clearing, and Beloved disappears.

Beloved’s disappearance is a respite (from the past’s demanding presence) and a loss (of the baby who was killed and of the future generation she was carrying): while the family-injury hunger she shares with Sethe is *no way to live* and her disappearance means that Denver may go on to some semblance of a life, her disappearance also leaves an absence that’s so deep Paul D experiences it when he returns to the house: “In the place where once a shaft of sad red light had bathed him, locking him where he stood, is nothing. A bleak and minus nothing. More like absence, but an absence he had to get through with the same determination he had when he trusted Sethe and

stepped through the pulsing light”(270). Paul D finds Sethe broken down by Beloved’s absence, tired and longing for bed the way Baby Suggs had after the Misery, turning to color and succumbing to death. When Paul D tries to convince Sethe to join him to make a future, he speaks in the spirit of the lesson Denver remembered as she stepped out in the yard to nourish her mother and sister, animated as they are—but not sustained—by the family-injury. Having absorbed the lessons of the final phase, after so many years of waiting and making a life with hurt and its effects, Denver’s timeline is not re-organized by Beloved’s departure: “She turning out fine,” taking on work, caring for her mother, being tutored in preparation for Oberlin College, and moving toward an extension of her family tree, she is spending time with a young man who make her face look “like someone had turned up the gas jet”(267).

It’s not clear whether Denver’s attention, itself enabled by knowledge of her family structure’s deep injury, is the cause or the effect of the ghost’s development along parallel periods of time. The baby ghost comes alive for Denver when her deafness and fear turn her attention toward it, and it is after a duration equal to her sister’s life before being killed—two years—that Denver’s hearing returns and she is the only one who can correctly identify the loud sounds as the baby ghost crawling up the stairs. It is at this particular moment, when the baby ghost has had Denver’s audience for the same amount of time as the baby’s life, that the baby ghost turns spiteful, full of venom. And after eight more years, eighteen after the Misery, the ghost returns as a revenant that is “Grown. The age it would have been had it lived”(255). But it’s clear that although Denver’s deafness may be explainable as psychosomatic, the text proposes something beyond and before a two-year period of soundlessness with its attendant suprasensation; its co-duration with her sister’s lifespan; and the way it shapes the attentions, losses, and pleasures of the original hunger. Through Denver’s disability, we see how much this novel writes the injury to lineage as playing out as something passed on, something that had been there all along for Denver, but also something that

results from systemic and systemically-compelled violence, inflicted on the level of kinship systems, generations, family. Disabled embodiment is written as a mode of living with lineage-injury, experiencing its losses, finding its pleasures, re-orienting oneself to its distinct continuations.

Conclusion

In 1999, the Middle Passage Monument Project lowered a 17-foot aluminum arch onto the seafloor of the Atlantic Ocean, 427 kilometers off the coast of New York. Its founder claims that the monument was inspired by an ancestor who came to him in a dream, and though the monument's public rhetoric is about marking, remembering, providing a "grave marker on the world's largest yet unmarked graveyard, the Atlantic Ocean's infamous Middle Passage... [and providing] an opportunity for Black people to collectively begin healing from the atrocities of slavery,"¹²⁵ the monument's rhetoric as an art object is moving for its formal repetition of disappearance and loss. After Beloved "erupts into her separate parts," according to the final chapter of the novel, she is forgotten, and eventually all trace of her disappears. The narrative, in focusing on the self-serving reasons for the forgetting, the need to continue ("quickly and deliberately forg[etting] her" like a bad dream; "remembering seemed unwise"), and in insisting that "she has claim" but remains unclaimed, portraying her as "the girl who waited to be loved and cry shame," who "crouched" somewhere, for some reason, this forgetting is cruel, regrettable. The end, though, along with the repeated phrase "This is not a story to pass on," claims a simultaneous presence/absence. "This is not a story to pass on" can mean it must never be repeated, passed on to other people; but it also means that it won't pass on to "the other side," dying away. Likewise, the wry tone at the very end over-denies and thus opens a space of potential for exactly the opposite of

¹²⁵ Johanna C. Kardux, "Monuments of the Black Atlantic," in *Blackening Europe: The African American Presence*, ed. Heike Raphael-Hernandez (New York: Routledge, 2012), 89.

the statements' claims: that "all trace is gone[...] The rest is weather. Not the breath of the disremembered and unaccounted for, but wind in the eaves, or spring ice thawing too quickly. Just weather. Certainly no clamor for a kiss"(275).

In *Beloved*, the grave injuries inflicted in the Misery—and the “vestibular cultural formation where ‘kinship’ loses meaning, since it can be invaded at any given and arbitrary moment by the property relations”—don’t stay submerged, crackling to the surface of narrative time and lifespan, surfacing in the flesh of the next generation.¹²⁶ Having attended to the less-than-directly acquired disabilities in *Beloved*—both sustained by Sethe and Halle’s children, the children of the children who weren’t thrown away—we find lineage-level injury impressing itself upon Denver’s sensorium, bursting it into the para-normal, re-attuning her to particular losses. In her sister’s case, it is this attunement that seems to animate, setting into motion a life-span repeat that shifts to spite at the moment of injury unto death. Morrison’s text, that is, imagines disability on the level of the kinship system, bringing to life the metaphorically shaped dead flesh on Sethe’s back, the family tree as a body. Denver’s disabilities and *Beloved*’s return are powered by and manifest the “enforced state of breach” their lineage has endured; they make this form of injury present.

It’s tempting to read *Beloved*’s presence as some kind of supernatural judgment, a deepening of violence’s reach—or alternately, as a redemptive overcoming of the injuries to Sethe and Halle’s family and to kinship systems under slavery. But a disability analysis warns us to beware overcoming narratives, because in the context of disability, they tend to erase the injustice of structural and social barriers by presenting an individual’s power of will or positive attitude as trivializing those barriers’ effects. To do so in this context would be to risk trivializing the injuries sustained by individual black bodies and minds, as well as multi-person kinship systems, despite good intentions to celebrate the

¹²⁶ Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 74.

enduring will to survive and the body's—even the lineage-body's—capacity to heal. Again, trans-ability is a more useful lens for understanding the nature of injury under slavery, including family injury: when Sethe kills her baby, it's not a fall from an unperturbed, un-injured family structure to a now-broken one. Despite the beautiful cast that's given to Sethe's 28 days before the Misery, this novel is clear that Sethe was making her rough choice in an existing scenario: “if I hadn't killed her she would have died”[200]. And when the baby—or the one lost at sea—returns as Beloved, it's not a cure for the kinship-injury but a continuation of lineage and its bodies in a different mode. While Beloved's resurrection doesn't erase the violence of her death nor heal her family's injury, she is a figure for injury that takes on a life of its own, injury not reducible to the hurt of power's violence.

In writing Denver's disability and her shifting modes of being-with specters and being with her family's injury, *Beloved* forces us to distinguish the harm of injury from its effects. Injury is violence, something we do not want in our futures; and it has effects—disability, embodied and enminded variation—which are not themselves mutually exclusive with a desirable future, and in fact, as we see with Denver, they can enable particular arts of living.¹²⁷ The nature of the shifts in Denver's embodiment—written as they are as less-than-simple instances of loss—encourages this trans-ability account of injury under slavery. Not a fall from grace and wholeness into disability, with the only imaginable future exact return, in cure. Instead, a way of life at base injured (movement from Carolina to Sweet Home to Ohio dubiously different), that further injury still changes, against all ableist logic. Denver's disability is surprisingly illuminating once its pieces are gathered, and it is mobilized by the novel to imagine the lasting effects of lineage-level injury. Shifts felt generations

¹²⁷ I'm thinking here of a quote from Neil Marcus's *Storm Reading*: “Disability is not a brave struggle or ‘courage in the face of adversity.’ Disability is an art. It's an ingenious way to live.” *Storm Reading*, directed by Rod Lathim (Santa Barbara, CA: Access Theatre, 1989), DVD.

later, even in the flesh: tectonic impacts, “skipping” gaits and other non-normative forms of forward motion, continuation.

CHAPTER THREE, Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*, Care, and Racialized Misfitting

Both the author of these Notes and the Notes themselves are, of course, fictional. Nevertheless, such persons as the composer of these Notes not only exist in our society, but indeed must exist, considering the circumstances under which our society has generally been formed. I have wished to bring before the public, somewhat more distinctly than usual, one of the characters of our recent past. He represents a generation that is still living out its days among us. In the fragment entitled "Underground" this personage describes himself and his views and attempts, as it were, to clarify the reasons why he appeared and was bound to appear in our midst. The subsequent fragment will consist of the actual "notes," concerning certain events in his life.
(Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*)

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, treated in the first chapter of this dissertation, begins with a play on the first line of Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*: "I am a sick man" becomes "I am an invisible man." Written nearly forty years later, Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* begins with an epigraph that reproduces the "Author's note" from the same text, reproduced above. This epigraph echoes a publisher's disclaimer that "This is a work of fiction," and frames the novel with a pointed insistence on the fiction's representationality, its connection to actual kinds of people that do and must exist, "considering the circumstances under which our society has generally been formed."

As a black man, *Invisible Man*'s first-person narrator is representational and representative of a group marked out by American racism: he "was in the cards, other things having been equal (or unequal) eighty-five years ago"¹²⁸ (15). *American Psycho*'s first-person narrator, Patrick Bateman, is a white Wall Street financier who has had a certain kind of education (preparatory school, then Harvard), who works at a certain firm (Pierce & Pierce), who wears certain kinds of clothes and

¹²⁸ This time-stamp likely refers to the abolition of slavery with the Thirteenth Amendment, 85 years before 1950, along with the transmogrifications of white supremacy and racialized social control to other institutions in the Black Codes that underwrote Jim Crow. See Douglas Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* (New York: Anchor Books, 2008) and Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010), especially the chapter titled "The Rebirth of Caste."

maintains certain cosmetic regimen, who frequents certain Zagat-rated restaurants and the newest clubs. Patrick understands himself to be representative as a rich person: one of the positive thoughts that drifts through his head as he's receiving a facial is "the fact that I don't live in a trailer park or work in a bowling alley or attend hockey games or eat barbecued ribs"; and when he is being mugged, he narrates, "I'm left with one comforting thought: I am rich—millions are not"(117; 392). However, over the course of the novel's vignettes, Patrick becomes increasingly legible as representative of a disparaged, class-based, racially-coded group, yuppies: wealthy, white, and in the terms of the novel, *unhip*.

Most criticism of *American Psycho* does not read it as a novel about race. Walter Benn Michaels has gone so far as to say that "the categories of difference in which *American Psycho* is relentlessly invested [...] have nothing to do with either respect for or hostility to racial and cultural difference."¹²⁹ But it's also not accurate to say that *American Psycho* is only about class or that racism is a mere footnote to how the novel frames, in Georgina Colby's formulation, "the schism between political ideology and the actual social divide in American society."¹³⁰ The novel presents formally distinctive, intensely detailed descriptions of furnishings, cuisine, and electronics, accounts of name brands, specs, material construction, and provenance as a consumer artifact, and the distribution of such descriptions marks white, wealthy people apart in kind. The most common by far are the

¹²⁹ Walter Benn Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004): 149–150. Michaels echoes Elizabeth Young's point that only in murder does Patrick show a lack of discrimination, arguing that Patrick's murders are not properly speaking hate crimes, as he does not in any apparent way target people because of their membership in a group. See also Elizabeth Young, "The Beast in the Jungle, The Figure in the Carpet," in *Shopping in Space: Essays on American "Blank Generation" Fiction*, eds. Elizabeth Young and Graham Caveney (London: Serpent's Tail, 1992).

¹³⁰ Georgina Colby, *Bret Easton Ellis: Underwriting the Contemporary* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 69.

detailed accounts of the clothing that Patrick and his yuppie peers wear, which make each proper-name bearing person present to the scene as a big fuss of commodity goods. For example:

I'm wearing a four-button double-breasted wool and silk suit, a cotton shirt with a button-down collar by Valentino Couture, a patterned silk tie by Armani and cap-toed leather slippers by Allen Edmonds. Murphy is wearing a six-button double-breasted wool gabardine suit by Courrèges, a striped cotton shirt with a tab collar and a foulard-patterned silk-crepe tie, both by Hugo Boss. (180)

This descriptive mannerism is only extended to other yuppies; Patrick's first-person narrative doesn't cling to the surfaces of other human beings in this way. Instead, non-yuppies are given spare designations composed of an employment status, or some putatively body-related descriptor, often racial: the other people are "the driver, black, not American"(3); "the maid, and elderly Chinese woman"(28); "the vendor"(70); "black guys" or "a couple of skinny faggots"(128). As it makes white people present as a set of sartorial surfaces—particularly white, male, able-bodied, heterosexual people, those who most closely approximate the unmarked body of abstract personhood—, the narrative also devotes a great deal of time and detailed attention to Patrick's body as a surface cultivated by beauty and fitness regimen—workouts, facials, and manicures.¹³¹ That is, the world of the novel as it is related by Patrick's narrative shapes a sharp descriptive distinction between kinds of people: some are demarcated as an instance of a group, while Patrick and his white peers are figured as a detailed surface, taut skin covered over by elaborate ensembles and possessing a proper name.

American Psycho puts pressure on Patrick's representativeness as actually representational when it makes the cultural scenes of Reagan-era whiteness absurd: despite their elaborate detail, Patrick and his peers are totally interchangeable, often hailing one another by the wrong name and conducting entire interactions in which one or both parties has misidentified the other. Other scenes

¹³¹ About the heterosexuality made invisible by marking homosexuality, Eve Sedgwick writes: "To the degree that heterosexuality does not function as a sexuality...there are stubborn barriers to making it accountable, to making it so much as visible, in the framework of projects of historicizing and hence denaturalizing sexuality." *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 10–11.

drag on with lengthy conversations about kinds of bottled water; Patrick nearly melts down over restaurant reservations, and in another scene, the dialogue is co-opted by his girlfriend's over-investment in the arrangement of take-out sushi on a platter. But beyond these invitations to disbelief about the actual existence of a wealthy, lifestyle-organized racial group that behaves in these ways, the novel challenges readers' ability to accept Patrick's representational representativeness (his typical, actual existence) because he is a serial killer who seduces and then injures, mutilates, rapes, and kills scores of vulnerable people.¹³² In mobilizing the epigraph from *Notes from Underground*, *American Psycho* imagines that its audience will deny such a person's actual existence and stakes a claim against reading this figure as exceptional. Thus the epigraph acknowledges the *Psycho* of the title—how Patrick Bateman will present as non-representative or aberrant in his madness and his murderousness—even as it underlines and insists upon his belonging to *American*.¹³³

The Problem of Response

Besides their engagements with *Notes from Underground*, *American Psycho* and *Invisible Man* are both narratives of New York undergrounds: but one is an underground of resistance, and one is hell. As the invisible acts on “this compulsion to put invisibility down in black and white”(143), he addresses his readers from a hole in the ground in the prologue and epilogue that bookend the novel's bildungsroman chapters. Following a similar structure, *American Psycho* is composed of first-person vignettes that are each “another broken scene in what passes for my life”(389), and bookending these vignettes, the very first and the very last line of the novel repeat the inscriptions of signs Patrick sees in his environment: “Abandon all hope, ye who enter here”(3) and “This is not an

¹³² Most critics read Patrick's murderous behavior as an extension of or a certain more honest manifestation of his belonging to conservative whiteness. But as my readings will show, the novel actually positions his madness and murderousness antagonistically to his ability to “fit in.”

¹³³ Patrick's Americanness is and isn't specific: it is routed through his belonging to white, yuppie cultures, which are themselves a product of a much larger conglomerate of “circumstances under which our society has generally been formed.”

exit”(399). These allusions to Dante’s *Inferno* and Jean-Paul Sartre’s existentialist play, *No Exit*, work in concert to locate Patrick’s narration in another (figurative) underground, hell.

Despite these resonances, the invisible man speaks from a basement apartment located on the edge of Harlem, while Patrick Bateman circulates on the other end of Manhattan, committing most of his murderous assaults in a luxury apartment on the tenth floor. The invisible man is squatting in a “building rented strictly to whites”(6); Patrick Bateman’s neighbor is Tom Cruise (70). The invisible man is siphoning massive amounts of free electricity from Monopolated Light & Power’s lines to power a lighting installment he’s rigged up, and he has plans to tinker together phonographs and shoe-warming gadgets. Patrick has an affinity for gadgets himself, detailing the luxury electronics that fill his apartment for nearly a page (“a thirty-inch digital TV set from Toshiba;[...] a super-high-band Beta [Toshiba VCR unit...and] a complete stereo system (CD player, tape deck, tuner, amplifier) by Sansui with six-foot Duntech Sovereign 2001 speakers in Brazilian rosewood”[25]). But these gadgets are mass-produced, ordered up, and delivered. Later in the novel, the entire outfit is replaced and detailed for three pages: an audio receiver, analog and high-performance cassette decks, a multidisc CD player, a camcorder, a TV monitor, an LD-ST disc player, and a “pair of Threshold monoblock amplifiers that cost close to \$15,000”(306-08). Whereas the invisible man’s home and its accoutrements seize and subvert resources in an act of trickster “ingenuity,” a creative piecing-together of solutions from a position of being limited by the American racial contract,¹³⁴ Patrick Bateman’s home-making is an act in property, propriety, and the conventions of “the top of the line,” undertaken with abundant resources. As becomes clear when Patrick frets and appraises the homes of his colleagues, Tim Price and Paul Owen, there is a certain

¹³⁴ I’m referring to Charles W. Mills’s argument that the social contract on which American democracy was formed only ever included people who count as full persons, i.e., white people. See *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).

skill involved in Patrick's virtuosic knowledge of the commodity form, regimes of taste, and how best to convey his wealth. Patrick acts illicitly, co-opting resources from their proper use toward his own ends (to put it perhaps much too blandly), not by seizing on institutions but on the bodies of others. And instead of black political resistance to white hegemony, these acts are attached to compulsion and madness.

At the very end of *Invisible Man*, the narrator raises the question of madness and responsibility, addressing his audience as likely reading him as exceptional rather than representative, endangering the ethical possibility that the novel extends. He says, "Ah, I can hear you say, 'so it was all a build-up to bore us with his buggy jiving. He only wanted us to listen to him ravel' But only partially true. [...] And it is this which really frightens me: Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?"(581). To listen to the invisible man's voice, to understand his account of American racism, "what was really happening when your eyes were looking through," is key to enabling any ethical response. And the "frighten[ing]" thought is that because his words represent an unfamiliar reality, they—and he—may be utterly dismissed on grounds of mental disability.¹³⁵

Reading *American Psycho* involves a similar danger. Indeed, as any brief survey of the novel's reception and critical history shows, the conjunction of madness with great violence all too often frustrates the task of interpretation: the most common response has been to avoid listening to

¹³⁵ Ellison also reported on the Lafargue Clinic, a psychiatric free clinic in—again—a Harlem basement; his reportage praises the Lafargue Clinic for integrating psychotherapy and making it accessible to "the underprivileged," and for its understanding of environmental etiologies of mental distress. See "Harlem is Nowhere," *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan, 320–327 (New York: Modern Library, 1995). But in beginning to think through these issues, he may have anticipated how psychiatric discourse would be used to disqualify racial protest. Jonathan Metzl in particular has documented how mental illness became dangerous and racialized—schizophrenia in particular—in the wake of the Civil Rights era; protest and anger at racial injustice was often identified in these discourses as the source of mental illness. See *The Protest Psychosis: How Schizophrenia Became a Black Disease* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009). See also J. Bradford Campbell, "The Schizophrenic Solution: Dialectics of Neurosis and Anti-psychiatric Animus in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*," *Novel* 43.3 (Fall 2010): 443–465.

Patrick Bateman by pathologizing him, the novel itself, or its author. This pathologizing move is one of containing danger, and it works by individualizing the threat and responding with dismissal or (prescribed) annihilation. For some readers, to represent violence in graphic detail, as *American Psycho* does, is to enact violence.¹³⁶ Other contemporaneous reviews and some of the scholarship on the novel have contained its danger by focusing their interpretive energies on judging whether the events in the novel are really happening or not, and by extension how much the novel is really “about” its narrator’s madness and unreliability. They often cite some of Patrick’s most noticeable breaks from normal reality, as when a park bench speaks to him and follows him for six blocks, or when he sees a Cheerio being interviewed on his favorite talk show, in order to conclude that he is an unreliable narrator. These critics, likewise uncomfortable with avowing *American Psycho* as a realist novel, instead work to interpretively fix it as “mere” fabrication. Michael P. Clark has helpfully articulated a “complacent moralism” in both of these responses, which he describes as “readings of *American Psycho* that insist on conflating the act of narration with the violent acts the narrator describes, or that dismiss Patrick’s accounts of violence as psychotic fantasies or a sick joke. Both responses are really strategies for not reading, for refusing the obligation to reply that distinguishes ethical reading from moral condemnation.”¹³⁷

¹³⁶ The most widely publicized criticism on these grounds was spearheaded by Tammy Bruce, the president of the Los Angeles chapter of the National Organization for Women (NOW). Calling the book a “how-to novel on the torture and dismemberment of women,” the organization organized a boycott of the book and its publisher, so that the publisher would “learn violence against women in any form is no longer socially acceptable.” Rosa A. Eberley, *Citizen Critics: Literary Public Spheres* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 113–114.

¹³⁷ Michael P. Clark, “Violence, Ethics, and the Rhetoric of Decorum in *American Psycho*,” in *Bret Easton Ellis: American Psycho, Glamorama, Lunar Park*, ed. Naomi Mandel (New York: Continuum, 2011), 34.

One of the text's most famous interlocutors avoids moral condemnation, but also fails to engage in ethical reading.¹³⁸ In "Children of the Pied Piper," Norman Mailer argues against the novel's detractors, insisting that "Ellis's novel cannot be disqualified solely by a bare description of its contents, no matter how hideous are the extracts. [...] Ellis has an implicit literary right, obtained by the achievements of every important and adventurous novelist before him, to write on any subject."¹³⁹ Though he attempts to read Patrick Bateman, ultimately Mailer judges the novel to have failed as art. And he grounds that judgment in a series of claims about the encounter with an unfamiliar reality that are unacceptable, imperialistically neurotypical. Mailer writes that the novel fails because it fails to have

a murderer with enough inner life for us to comprehend him. We pay a terrible price for reading about intimate violence. [...] We cannot go out on such a trip unless we believe we will end up knowing a little more, that is, of the real inner life of the murderer. Bateman, however, remains a cipher. [...] Bateman is driven, we gather, but we never learn from what. [...] We won't know anything about extreme acts of violence (which we do seek to know if for no less good reason than to explain the nature of humankind in the wake of the Holocaust) until some author makes such acts intimately believable, that is, believable not as acts of description (for that is easy enough) but as intimate personal states so intimate that we enter them.¹⁴⁰

Mailer "cannot forgive" Ellis and declares *American Psycho* a failed work of art solely on the grounds that Patrick Bateman is not legible in the way he expects; Mailer can't understand him or his drives, and because Bateman's first-person narrative expresses something that does not fit Mailer's hermeneutic and mental orientations, it has no worth. In judging the novel to have failed, Mailer questions the very reality, completeness, and validity of those voices whose logic is unknowable or

¹³⁸ Rosa Eberley credits Mailer with "shift[ing] the terms of the public debate over *American Psycho* from pragmatic political and social concerns—public concerns—to concerns over the book as art in isolation. [...] Mailer's use of the criterion of literary value changed the contour of public debate over the book and transferred ownership of the issue from feminists and social critics to literary experts in the realm of aesthetics." *Citizen Critics*, 108–109.

¹³⁹ Norman Mailer, "Children of the Pied Piper," *Vanity Fair*, March 1991, 159.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 220–21.

illegible by dominant rubrics of rationality or sense-making. Mailer thus repeats and deepens a hermeneutic cruelty at the heart of the “moral complacency” that Clark has critiqued: because Bateman’s inner dialogue obsesses over shampoos and because he is impelled to terrible, violent acts in ways that we can’t understand, his inner life as a character *does not exist* and his narrative is dismissed as having no value.¹⁴¹

For *American Psycho*, madness has endangered our ability to read Patrick Bateman, but the payoff of avoiding such danger—refusing to repeat interpretive modes that underwrite the incarceration and extermination of mentally disabled people by remaining responsive to his experience as it is narrated—is frustrated by the difficulty of bearing witness to the sense-making of a narrator whose unfamiliar sense-making is also all-too-familiar. Our difficulty in ethically responding stems from the task of continuing to read through the tedium of catalogued consumption and vapid conversation, but it’s also about the way Patrick and his peers are so immured in and committed to conservative, white supremacist ideologies that they, for example, constantly misread the situation with homeless people they encounter, calling them “dumb fucking nigger[s]” who are too lazy to “get a real job”(212). In bombastic speeches, Patrick relates to political commitments as yet another catalogue of things to possess if not actually espouse; his complaint, in noticing a gentrified block filled with parked black Porsches, that there is not a Range Rover to steal.¹⁴² Of course, we need not assent to this worldview just because it is the narrator’s. The novel obliquely gestures to events like the Tompkins Square Park Riot, a notoriously racist raid on an encampment of homeless people that highlighted the revanchist violations of white investors,

¹⁴¹ Some of the critics already glossed above take a slightly different path to the same end: the events narrated didn’t really happen; this character is psychiatrically disabled or on drugs, and thus his narrative is to be dismissed as having no value.

¹⁴² This understanding of Patrick’s political speeches comes from Colby, *Underwriting the Contemporary*, 69.

and thus to the possibility of a critical outside.¹⁴³ But though it may not require assent, *American Psycho* specifically challenges its readers to inhabit Patrick's reality at length, vignette after vignette, preoccupation after preoccupation, through moments of mental distress, in scenes where he is manipulating another person's remains, at the office, at the gym, at home.

In what follows, this chapter tracks Patrick's attachment to "fitting in" to the ideal of the successful white business professional, and his relationship to its pains.¹⁴⁴ Patrick articulates his "need" or impulse to violence as a response to fitting's insignificance, and the readings offered here attend closely to different permutations of response from others when Patrick confesses, and in moments when his actions otherwise come into view. The drama staged across these scenes centers around Patrick's lack of control over his own significance, being-recognized, and eliciting a response. Using Rosemarie Garland Thomson's account of misfitting as a relation that produces impediment, this chapter reads four scenes of misfitting that take place outside of the yuppie social circles where Patrick usually circulates. When Patrick is recognized by a taxi driver, he experiences a discomfiting noticeability and is reduced to a type; the driver does offer recognition and he passes judgment (shaking Patrick down for his valuables), but does not ethically engage with Patrick. In her account of a feminist disability studies ethics of care, Margaret Price presents care as an alternative to judgment, emphasizing the way care sustains a misfit between a person giving care and a person experiencing mental pain. In the scene of this sustained misfit, care refuses to eradicate another person's reality, however unfamiliar or incomprehensible, and insists on a shared lifeworld and on the possibility that the other might be understood. This ethical engagement is one that Patrick

¹⁴³ John Conley, "The Poverty of Bret Easton Ellis," *Arizona Quarterly* 65, no. 3 (Autumn 2009): 117–118.

¹⁴⁴ This chapter takes its sense of the yuppie ideal from Patrick's narration; for a helpful account of the relationship between Reagan-era policies and yuppiedom as a lifestyle narrative, see Jane Feuer, *Seeing Through the Eighties: Television and Reaganism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995).

experiences on two occasions: first, at a Chinese dry cleaners when he is refused service. Though he breaks from the scene of care in the moment, its effect is so powerful that he tries to recreate it during an acute anxiety attack, in which he is experiencing a great deal of mental distress. He encounters a different scene of care in a kosher deli when he is refused service as he tries to recreate the pleasures he got from aligning his consumption practices with those of a homeless black man he had grievously harmed. Again, care is an experience of recognition and suspension in a misfitting produced by dissent, an outside to the smooth functioning of Wall Street's white social sphere and its interchangeable actors.

Fitting and Misfitting

At lunch with his college girlfriend, Bethany, Patrick makes conversation by asking Bethany about where she works, and when she returns the exchange by asking if he is at Pierce & Pierce, Patrick becomes explicitly uncomfortable in a way that gives us access to one of his fundamental desires. When she asks, “But doesn't your family own—,” he cuts her off by saying “I don't want to talk about this. [...] But yes, Bethany, yes.” The yeses continue:

“And you still work at P & P?” she asks. Each syllable is spaced so that it bursts, booming sonically, into my head.

“Yes,” I say, looking furtively around the room.

“But—” She's confused. “Didn't your father—”

“Yes, of course,” I say, interrupting. “Have you had the focaccia at Pooncakes?”

“Patrick.”

“Yes?”

“What's wrong?”

“I just don't want to talk about...” I stop. “About work.”

“Why not?”

“Because I hate it,” I say. “Now listen, have you tried Pooncakes yet? I think Miller underrated it.”

“Patrick, she says slowly. “If you're so uptight about work, why don't you just quit? You don't have to work.”

“Because,” I say, staring directly at her, “I ... want... to ... fit... in.”

After a long pause, she smiles. “I see.” There's another pause.

This one I break. “Just look at it as, well, a new approach to business,” I say.

“How”—she stalls—“sensible.” She stalls again. “How, um, practical.”(237)

The halting pace of this conversation is very different from the streams of detail and breezy conversation that dominate the novel, setting his interaction with Bethany apart in kind. Patrick's discomfort and failed topic changing initially stem from a desire not to talk about his father, and as they redirect the conversation to a scene of shared consumption, it becomes clearer that they articulate the pain of misfitting. Patrick takes part in the world of work and Wall Street, but he does so in ways that he can't attribute to himself, and Patrick's class privilege interrupts his conformity to a version of whiteness that imagines itself as deserving. Immediately afterward, he takes control of the interaction about this prosaic failure to inhabit the racialized industriousness that Reagan-era dog-whistle rhetorics used to dismantle American social supports.¹⁴⁵ Instead alluding to a more threatening industriousness, Patrick hints that his job acts as a cover for his activities as a serial murderer, "a new approach to business." Bethany's response stalls because she understands and recognizes what Patrick is telling her; in another vignette, Patrick recalls that "Bethany, her arm in a sling, a faint bruise above her cheek, ended it all"(211). Ultimately, she assents to his actions, more invested in maintaining the smooth functioning of the interaction, however haltingly.

More typically, Patrick's murderous activities challenge his fit with yuppie whiteness, rather than lewdly ensuring it. Following from this scene's vulnerable admission, Patrick is a virtuosic student of conforming to the norm, citing style manuals and food reviews, diligently maintaining his appearance, dutifully having dinner with his girlfriend, Evelyn. But his efforts work all too well: on four different occasions, colleagues remark on his skin tone, saying "nice tan" (42, 48, 55, 229).

When his colleagues ask where he goes to cultivate it, he defensively recodes his distinction as fitting in, saying, "Read my lips,' I say, 'a tanning salon,' then irritably, 'like *everyone* else'"(48). In a few

¹⁴⁵ Ronald Reagan's 1976 campaign famously referred to a Chicago "welfare queen" who was living a life of luxury on tax-payers' dime, using racially-coded rhetorics of indolence. See Ian Haney-López, *Dog Whistle Politics: How Coded Racial Appeals Have Reinvented Racism and Wrecked the Middle Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

instances, he does misfit, as when he suggests a dinner companion have Diet Pepsi rather than Diet Coke: “The waiter, Scott, Anne, and even Courtney—they all stare at me as if I’ve offered some kind of diabolical, apocalyptic observation, as if I were shattering a myth highly held, or destroying an oath that was solemnly regarded, and it suddenly seems almost hushed in Deck Chairs [the restaurant]” (97). He relents to say it’s just his recommendation, but experiences extreme mental distress: “I look down at my lap, and the blue cloth napkin, the words Deck Chairs sewn into the napkin’s edge, and for a moment think I’m going to cry; my chin trembles and I can’t swallow”(98).

Despite his enduring aspiration to conform to the white, professional-class norm, he also chafes at it, and the narrative figures his “*need* to engage in...homicidal behavior on a massive scale” as a sort of salve to unmarked personhood’s unremarkability, its insignificance. When Bateman’s colleague, Tim Price, is complaining about Camden girls’ soap operatic problems and suggests that Patrick agrees with him, Patrick’s girlfriend pins him to his spectacular approximation of the norm with a figure from white suburbia: “Patrick is *not* a cynic, Timothy. He’s the boy next door, aren’t you honey?,” and Patrick does and doesn’t respond: “No I’m not,’ I whisper to myself. ‘I’m a fucking evil psychopath’”(20). Patrick articulates the problem with fitting in when he finally has a table at the hottest restaurant in town, Dorsia:

While taking a piss in the men’s room, I stare into a thin, web-like crack above the urinal handle and think to myself that if I were to disappear into that crack, say somehow miniaturize and slip into it, the odds are good that no one would notice I was gone. No... one... would...care. In fact, some, if they noticed my absence, might feel an odd, indefinable sense of relief. This is true: the world is better off with some people gone. Our lives are *not* interconnected. (226)

Patrick’s sense of how his world moves is confirmed when he kills a colleague named Paul Owen. Even though people have noted that he’s not reachable by phone, even though his girlfriend has hired a private inspector to investigate, and even though Paul Owen’s apartment has been put up for sale, Patrick is absolved on two occasions by the routine misrecognitions and interchangeabilities that characterize his social world. In one instance, a colleague mistakes Patrick’s confession of

multiple murders as a joke, but when pressed, says, “But that’s simply not possible [...] Because ...I had...dinner...with Paul Owen...twice...in London...*just ten days ago*” (388). The certainty with which Patrick’s colleague asserts Paul Owen’s presence in London is undercut by the fact that he inaccurately refers to Patrick as “Davis” at the outset of their interaction, and “Donaldson” as he excuses himself.

Against the invisibility and interchangeability that derives from so dutifully approximating a white, boy-next-door norm, Patrick asserts his status as a murderer. The pleasures of murder, as Patrick articulates them, are also explicitly tied to the idea of interconnection. Though his reasoning diverges from normative reasoning as he regrets killing a small child, this passage articulates a sense-making for his murders:

Though I am satisfied at first by my actions, I’m suddenly jolted with a mournful despair at how useless, how extraordinarily painless, it is to take a child’s life. This thing before me, small and twisted and bloody, has no real history, no worthwhile past, nothing is really lost. It’s so much worse (and more pleasurable) taking the life of someone who has hit his or her prime, who has the beginnings of a full history, a spouse, a network of friends, a career, whose death will upset far more people whose capacity for grief is limitless than a child’s would, perhaps ruin many more lives than just the meaningless, puny death of this boy. (299)

The ability to inflict a loss that would impact countless other people is what appeals to Patrick, framing the pleasure of his actions as exploitations of interconnectedness in inflicting pain. Counter to the life-cut-short logic that underwrites most accounts of a child’s death, and imagines a child’s life as having greater unfulfilled potentiality, Patrick values the boy’s death less because he has less (or a shorter) realized actuality, and is connected to fewer people.¹⁴⁶ This rumination establishes Patrick’s murders as satisfying because they confirm interconnection and actualization in a scene where he most commonly experiences his body as interchangeable and unmarked, and where he finds himself thinking, “*I simply am not there*” (377).

¹⁴⁶ Patrick attaches his own life to this poverty of connections when he describes a bloodstained Burberry scarf and matching coat as “something a little kid might wear”(30).

The “fitting in” to which Patrick aspires, and by which he is ultimately troubled, is the successful approximation of a Reagan-era, hardworking, white American citizen. Misfit happens when he fails to play the part, but it’s a failure that is always located in consumption practices (Diet Pepsi, pizza, serial killer biographies). Despite the minutiae of these criteria, no misfit is produced when Patrick says, “Listen, guys, my life is a living hell,’ [and] they utterly ignore me”(347). Even when Patrick is unwell in a way that is extremely apparent in his narration, he is unable to misfit in this interaction with a fellow financier because of how little his specificity matters. “[S]weat-drenched and delirious,” Patrick encounters “Charles Murphy from Kidder Peabody or it could be Bruce Barker from Morgan Stanley, *whoever*, and he says ‘Hey Kinsley,’ and I belch into his face, my eyes rolling back into my head, greenish bile dripping in strings from my bared fangs, and he suggests, unfazed, ‘See you at Fluties, okay? Severt too?’”(151).

In this way, *American Psycho* writes unfamiliar logics into the vicissitudes of yuppie fit and misfit: along with the dilemma of becoming invisible in the process of self-cultivation toward an unmarked, abstract personhood, Patrick’s interactions with his peers diverge from real-world expectations for what might interrupt a social scene. In her account of fit and misfit, Rosemarie Garland Thomson figures misfit as a contingent state of being impeded in order to disarticulate fitting or misfitting from particular kinds of bodies. This focus on an ever-shifting situation of being impeded or not impeded diverges from a more fixed understanding of particular, marked bodies as having impairments¹⁴⁷ in a fixed, continuous, stable way. The *misfit* names a “co-constituting relationship between flesh and environment” that recognizes how the relationship between body

¹⁴⁷ Garland Thomson is more properly talking about disability, as distinguished from impairment by the social model. According to that distinction, impairment resides in the body and is value-neutral; disability arises when social and physical spaces make impairment a problem. I’m retaining the language of impairment, here, to emphasize the concept’s flexibility, which depends on its focus on the interaction between flesh and environment.

and environment works multiply across contexts—a disabled person may identify as disabled in an enduring way, but their experience of disability and even impairment is always shifting. Garland Thomson is more properly talking about disability, as distinguished from impairment by the social model. According to that distinction, impairment resides in the body and is value-neutral; disability arises when social and physical spaces make impairment a problem. I'm retaining the language of impairment, here, to emphasize the concept's flexibility, which depends on its focus on the interaction between flesh and environment. As a person moves through various spaces and social situations, their bodies and those situations fit easily or misfit, in ways that are more complex and variable than whether a building has a ramp or not. As Garland Thomson formulates it, fit and misfit are meant to be equally useful conceptual tools for when other ways of being in a body (legibility as white or as a woman, for example) matter or don't matter.

Margaret Price has articulated a way of responding in the scene of misfitting that she calls a feminist disability studies ethic of care. Among his peers, Patrick rectifies or denies the infractions that do cause misfit, repairing the scene; but when Patrick's peers brush off, ignore, or don't register his confessions of violence or his public mental distress, there's no misfit in the first place. But as the next section explores, Patrick's murderous actions *are* recognized in a few scenes that unfold outside the social spaces populated by suits. In these scenes, Patrick negotiates misfitting with the human kinds that do not belong to the dominant white conservative male power block. Patrick's narrative designates these people not in detail but by national, racial, or ethnic belonging, and in their responses, we witness indictment and dissent as a form of care; and judgment as its failure.

Forms of Care

As Price pushes off of Garland Thomson's examples of *misfit*, she considers how its relational, materialist focus on the scene of encounter between bodies, minds, and environments might be carried into the more difficult and fraught fits and misfits particular to the mad subject,

ones that can “involve harm [or] an affective judgment of harm.”¹⁴⁸ She proposes a thought experiment in which Person A and Person B are in a room with chairs and lamps, and Person A is experiencing “what his doctor would call ‘transient psychosis,’ and is desperately trying to get hold of one of the lamps so that he can strike himself on the head with it.”¹⁴⁹ Person B wants to keep Person A from harm, and believes Person A should not hit himself. Price summarizes: “There are two realities in the room: Person A should, or should not, hit himself. Hitting himself is either a means to *alleviate mental pain* by inflicting a different kind of pain, or an action that will *cause harm*. Both subjects are fully immersed in their own realities. And each one is occupying a reality that is *real*, important, and complete. Who is the misfit here?”¹⁵⁰

In considering such scenarios, less “easy” ones, Price’s essay explicitly seeks to explore scenarios where mental disability produces “badness,” pain, or harm, “contestatory” instances in that they work against some of the impulses to describe disability as desirable that undergird work like Garland Thomson’s essay on *misfit*. (Besides the kind of anti-reifying mobility of relationally determined *misfitting* and the space it opens for identifying *fitting* as a present experience, Garland Thomson’s essay celebrates crip resourcefulness, the kinds of improvisation and disability hacks that are part of many disabled people’s everyday experiences of fit or misfit.) Price’s article asks us to shift our conversation to pain, harm, and “badness” located more variably than in a hostile social or physical environment alone, and perhaps in the lived experience of disability itself. In such situations, it’s less easy to condemn misfit as something that must be eradicated. As Price analyzes the Person A and B scenario, she decides that Garland Thomson would say that “the misfit inheres not in either subject but in their relation, including their relative sociopolitical locations,” but

¹⁴⁸ Margaret Price, “The Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain,” *hypatia* 30.1 (Winter 2015): 272.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 273, emphasis original.

continues, “even if we categorize the misfit in the Person A/Person B scenario as emergent and relational, we cannot avoid the fact that the situation demands a *judgment*: a person either *should* or *should not* hit his head.”¹⁵¹

Price thus consciously invokes situations where the ethical dimensions of misfit are “murkier” than the misfit between a woman and a boardroom full of misogynists, or between a wheelchair user and a flight of stairs (examples in which misfit should clearly be re-tooled and eliminated). She does so in order to ask how to think about scenarios where disability—and misfit—involve not only multiple realities but also pain. This is such a difficult question because, as in the scenario with Person A and B, a DS perspective wants to value Person A’s reality rather than dismiss it as “wrong,” but it is equally troubling to adapt to and enable—to fit—a reality in which there will be harm. Price suggests “that a helpful response to the affective dilemma presented by the two people and the lamp is to move away from judgments of desirability and instead to consider the pain of the situation in terms of a *feminist DS ethics of care*.”¹⁵²

As Price presents care as an alternative approach to judgment in a scenario where extreme mental pain causes Person A to harm themselves, she explains a version of care derived from disability justice, and she makes the more abstract Person A and Person B scenario much more specific, narrating instances in which she (Person A) experienced care during mental distress that made her attempt self-harm in the company of her partner (Person B). Citing Mia Mingus’s articulation of collective self-care, “If you can’t go, then I don’t want to go,” Price articulates care as “moving together and being limited together. It means giving more when one has the ability to do

¹⁵¹ Ibid., emphasis original.

¹⁵² Ibid., 278, emphasis original.

so, and accepting help when that is needed. It does not mean knowing exactly what another's pain feels like, but it does mean respecting each person's pain as real and important."¹⁵³

As she elaborates what care might mean in a scene that involves harm, Price stipulates a certain condition that I have worked to show has not yet been realized in criticism of *American Psycho*, despite the Dostoevsky epigraph's insistence on Bateman's actual existence. "Finally," she writes, "care must emerge between subjects considered to be equally valuable (which does not necessarily mean that both are operating from similar places of rationality), and it must be participatory in nature, that is, developed through the desires and needs of all participants."¹⁵⁴

Though she does not quite articulate it this way, Price's conceptualization of care actually imagines a scene of *misfit* that is maintained rather than repaired by parties who insist on a shared belonging to a context, even if the parties who share that belonging do not share the same rubrics for making sense. Price explains that someone who is considered equally valuable is treated as someone who is having a meaningful experience, even if their actions are not safe and must be curtailed. In more familiar disciplinary scenes that fail to enact care, she elaborates, the other person "tr[ies] to restrain me while saying (in effect), 'Stop that right now! You're acting crazy! You're hurting yourself?' and so on, [and] the feeling that imparts is that I am completely insane, that is, radically separated from all other meaning-making subjects/objects." Price allows that it "may seem like quite a fine hair to split" to focus on mental disability as meaningful experience, as experience that may not be understandable, but in the scene of care, experience that is "take[n] for granted [as experience that] *should* be understood." The critical distinction, for Price, is eschewing any impulses to deny or eradicate pain in favor of "*witnessing and desire to help alleviate pain.*"¹⁵⁵ As Price describes

¹⁵³ Ibid., 279.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

the experience of being treated kindly after a break, being helped up, settled into a couch, and offered water, she frames the payoff of “being witnessed and cared for, even in the midst of unbearable pain” as a sense that “there may be some hope for all of [her] bodymind”; the corollary, particularly difficult to avoid when pain crosses the space of the interaction with violence or murder, is judgment’s conflation of mental disability’s reality and the harm that however opaquely follows from it, and the response that follows: disengagement via dismissal, erasure, or annihilation.

In an isolated scene in which Patrick is recognized and accused by a taxi driver named Abdullah, rather than confessing his crimes himself, Patrick’s relation to his murderous actions and his own visibility as significant changes dramatically: he is afraid, and he insists on his innocence. As the scene begins, Patrick notices the driver looking at him in the rearview mirror. He narrates, “A suspicious, hungry expression keeps changing the features on his face—a mass of clogged pores, ingrown hairs. I sigh, expecting this, ignoring him”(390). At the outset, Patrick understands the taxi driver’s interest as an expected dynamic between someone who does not have access to luxury skin care and someone who does, a relationship between the ordinary person and a spectacular embodiment of the ideal. Under the pressure of the taxi driver’s glare, Patrick tries to assert this logic of distinction when the driver says, “Hey, don’t I know you?,” suggesting that he looks familiar because he is a movie star. It is at this moment, when the driver speaks, that Patrick extends the way he notices the driver beyond matters of consumption and class-coded skin: Abdullah speaks “in a thick, barely penetrable accent that could easily be either New Jersey or Mediterranean”(390).

As the driver repeats that Patrick looks familiar, saying that he knows who Patrick is, rejecting his claim to stardom (“Nah, that’s not it,’ he says grimly”[391]), and insisting that he’s seen Patrick’s face somewhere, it becomes clear that he is waiting for Patrick to realize his own significance and confess. In this interaction of being recognized in a way he hasn’t yet identified, a non-anonymity that he can’t explain, Patrick checks the driver’s name and begins describing the

scene as scary. He says, “There’s a long, scary pause while he stares at me in the rearview mirror and the grim smile fades. His face is blank. He says, ‘I know. Man, I know who you are’, and he’s nodding”(391). Patrick is immobilized, ostensibly by the certainty Abdullah is transmitting about the distinction that follows from Patrick’s appearance. Patrick narrates, “I can’t move because he’s driving too fast and something intervenes, something unthinkable and ludicrous, and I hear him say it, maybe. ‘You’re the guy who kill Solly.’ His face is locked into a determined grimace”(391).

Abdullah’s enunciation of an accusation and recognition is framed here as unthinkable, immobilizing, and uncertain. The uncertainty about whether Abdullah “said it” most directly follows from Abdullah’s accent, his being from some place outside of New York; in this way, Patrick’s difficulty in registering Abdullah’s response to his actions is figured as a function of his inability to understand an ethnic English that is associated with those historically marked out racially as “defectives.” Abdullah’s accent is either Mediterranean and he is himself Southern European, or it is a New Jersey accent. In the cultural imagination and in census data, New Jersey’s largest ethnic population is Italian American, descendants of Southern European immigrants whose large numbers in the late 19th and early 20th century prompted Nativist alarm about the national stock and precipitated the discriminatory Immigration Act of 1924. Patrick’s incredulity, his sense that Abdullah’s accusation is “unthinkable and ludicrous” is more attached to the accusation itself, that Patrick has killed a particular man, Solly. As Patrick’s response to Abdullah’s accusation develops, he is incredibly invested in the question of whether he committed this particular murder, rather than a more generalized guilt.

As Abdullah pulls into a deserted parking area, Patrick reports feeling endangered and vulnerable, and unable to see a way forward: “I feel naked, suddenly, tiny,” he thinks, “My mouth tastes metallic, then it gets worse. My vision: a winter road. But I’m left with one comforting thought: I am rich—millions are not”(392). His financial capital is comforting not necessarily in

terms of offering security, but rather as something that confers distinction (if not spectacular, as with appearing to resemble a movie star). This comforting richness counters the unpleasant distinction Abdullah offers: being recognized and judged as having performed a particular action.

Abdullah's name means "servant of God," and the name of the driver who Bateman has killed, Solomon, means "peace" in Hebrew; its Aramaic form, Shlomo, is a name Patrick and his peers use indiscriminately to refer to their ethnic cab drivers, in a gesture of dismissal and typecasting ("So long, Shlomo"[4]; "Are you talking to me or Shlomo here?"[93]). Contra the white, high-powered men that Patrick encounters in his usual environs, Abdullah sees him as "the guy" who has committed a particular, significant action. The judgment that Abdullah hands down is to wrest control of the immediate situation from Patrick and strip him of his wealth. Abdullah hijacks the transportation Patrick has hired and orders Patrick out of the car in a deserted lot, robbing him of his watch, cash, and sunglasses at gunpoint before speeding off and leaving him behind.

Narratively, Abdullah's response transforms Patrick from being Solly's murderer, a particular person who committed a particular action that had an impact for Abdullah (the death of a friend), to being "guilty," a "scumbag." In this way, recognition does not produce care, because Abdullah's changing address forecloses any understanding of Patrick of someone who might be understood. More than understanding, the crucial thing being foreclosed in this scene is any sense of the other as someone one has a responsibility to. The desire that Price articulates—to understand even if that's difficult—relies on and actualizes an affirmation of the other's belonging to a shared context as a meaning-making subject. That's the ethical failure of what we might call "writing someone off," even in such scenes where the possibility of understanding, even if achieved, falls flat. That is, in scenes where harm is not turned on the other's self, as a kind of translation of pain to other forms; but rather scenes where harm is directed toward others.

Patrick, for his part, declaratively marks Abdullah off as “obviously deranged,” responding to misfitting by ejecting Abdullah from the scene. But as Abdullah demands Patrick’s belongings, Patrick shifts to an interrogative mode, asking Abdullah about his intentions and the grounds for his knowledge. Patrick begins by insisting, “You’ve, like, incorrectly identified me,” and shouting that he is innocent “with utter conviction”(392–93). he relents from the moment he hands over the first object, his watch, entertaining the possibility that he may have killed Solly: “Solly, I’m guessing, was the cabdriver I killed during the chase scene last fall, even though that guy was Armenian. I suppose I could have killed another one and I am just not recalling this particular incident”(393). Patrick’s own knowledge about his actions, he realizes, is uncertain (and perhaps incidentally, the driver he killed in the chase was Iranian, not Armenian [348]), which interrupts the dynamic he tries to realize in confessing to his peers: he has acted, and his confession exchanges that action for distinction and significance. In this case, Patrick’s claim to his own action is uncertain, and instead Abdullah exchanges his certain knowledge for Patrick’s wealth, interrupting the dynamic of services rendered (a ride to Wall Street) and cashed in on the significance of Patrick’s actions in ways Patrick has failed to. Patrick takes a great interest in the value of Abdullah’s certain knowledge especially when Abdullah frames it as deflating any retaliation for using it. Abdullah tells Patrick that he doesn’t fear Patrick reporting him “Because you’re guilty.” And even though Patrick is at this moment “handing over a knife [he] just found in [his] pocket that looks as if it was dipped into a bowl of blood and hair,” he asks Abdullah, “How do you know I’m guilty?”(393).

Abdullah doesn’t respond, he just continues to demand objects; Patrick mentally relents, assenting to Abdullah’s purchase on the situation: “Maybe I really did kill a Solly, though I’m positive that any cabdrivers I’ve killed lately were *not* American. I probably did. There probably *is* a wanted poster of me”(394). Patrick’s insistence that his victims were not American functions here not as a condition that makes his actions less objectionable, but rather as a descriptor that

establishes some certain form of his own knowledge about his victims. When Abdullah flaunts his control over the trade in Patrick's actions' significance by trying on the sunglasses and checking himself out in the mirror, Patrick counters with an ultimate threat to eliminate competition: "You're a dead man, Abdullah" (394). Abdullah's response again uses guilt—in a moral key, this time, rather than knowledge of others' actions to be coopted and exchanged—as grounds for asserting Patrick's incapacity for significant action: "And you're a yuppie scumbag. Which is worse?"(394). In this final exchange, Abdullah has also introduced a version of value that upsets Patrick's modes of moving through and understanding the world: over exchanging value properly and freely as a white, consummate consumer, Abdullah chooses death, taking what he can get meanwhile. Patrick sobs and babbles after this scene, shaken by it, because Abdullah has seen him and recognized his intervention into the world with a certainty that Patrick does not have access to, beyond hypothesizing that it is possible. Abdullah's response, one of stripping a structure of its assets, makes a judgment that walls Patrick off as a person to respond to (he's "a scumbag"), and in exacting a completely replaceable payback for a life, it de-values Patrick's actions.

Thus the scene with Abdullah is a recognition that doesn't take up the ethical engagement central to care. It is in another scene at a dry cleaners, jarring for Patrick, that misfit produces an encounter akin to what Margaret Price describes as care. Patrick is in pain when he takes the trip to the Chinese dry cleaner that he uses for blood-stained clothing to complain about stains they failed to get out: hungover, having slept in, skipped his usual work out, and missed his favorite talk show, he tells us that "I'm tense, my hair is slicked back, my Wayfarers on, my skull is aching.[...] I look sharp but my stomach is doing flip-flops, my brain is churning"(81). The short chapter that begins with this hangover ends with a hallucination; just after he describes his pain and just before he slips into "dreaming while still awake" he interacts with homeless people, and at the core of the chapter are two reactions to the evidence of violence, blood that flecks the surface of the Soprani jacket he

has come to complain about, and bloodstained sheets that he's brought with him for cleaning. These doubles stage variations of fit and misfit, responding and eliciting response differently, assent and dissent.

When he brings the laundry in, Patrick spends ten minutes pointing out the stains to the matron of the shop, whose husband is standing with her. As their interaction unfolds, the "tiny old Chinese woman" is unrelenting in her communication with Patrick, and though his narration depicts a response that is legible to readers as dissent and concern, it also depicts Patrick's experience as one of misfit, incomprehension, and increasingly racialized frustration. As the woman responds to what he is showing her, Patrick narrates: "I can't understand a word she's saying. But the husband remains utterly mute and doesn't bother to translate. The old woman keeps jabbering in what I guess is Chinese and finally I have to interrupt" (82). As the woman continues to communicate by grabbing and pointing at the sleeves of his jacket, and as "the yipping voice rises another octave" when she turns to the sheets, Patrick notes that she is speaking with wide eyes and "panicked jabbering [that] speeds up incoherently." But he can't imagine that she's saying anything other than something about her inability to wash out the stains. He begins by addressing the communication misfit as something that goes beyond a language barrier, interrupting her, talking over her: "shhh, you are *not* giving me *valid* reasons." Though the conceit of the communication the woman is trying to hold is that she needs valid reasons from *him*, Patrick is totally unable to read the situation, inferring why she might be speaking frantically about bloodstains. Instead, he guesses that she's said something about bleach, continuing to respond in ways that never connect with the matron's objection to the nature of the stains, focusing instead on the textiles' commodity value. "Two things," he says, "One. You can't bleach a Soprani. Out of the question. Two?—and then louder still over her—*two*, I can only get these sheets in Santa Fe. These are very expensive sheets and I *really* need them clean..." The matron's refusal is on the grounds that she *should* not clean them;

Patrick responds to her as if the issue is that she *cannot* clean them. As the matron continues to speak to him and as he attempts to interpret her response to his “clarifications,” his lack of understanding is so total that he imagines that she’s declared that she wants some ham.

As her refusal is more and more intransigent and his frustration deepens, his descriptions of her face and voice become more and more racialized: she is “the old woman” and then the “Chinese woman,” descriptors that give way to attention to her face and then particular features. First he notes “her face overall, [which] maybe because of the wrinkles, seems oddly expressionless,” and then “the woman’s flat, slanty-eyed face”(82–83). “Jabbering” and “yipping” becomes a “spastic, foreign tongue” and “screeching” (83). Though Patrick attempts to communicate, “leaning in, speak[ing] very slowly,” or “nodding, as if I understand her gibberish,” snapping out of bursts of anger to tell her “sincerely, in singsong, [...] ‘I *cannot* understand you,’” he increasingly reacts to the situation by reducing the woman to a racial stereotype, a person different in kind from whiteness’ normal, full humanity. Patrick is encountering, in this interaction, a deeply unfamiliar dissent, an actual recognition of his actions that creates a misfit with his desire for—and usual experience of—services rendered promptly. After saying he can’t understand, he says, “This is crazy. [...] I *can’t* cope with this,” invoking the same language of madness that he used in calling Abdullah “deranged” to defect from any scene of care. As the exchange continues, he becomes distressed, entertains fantasies of racially-loaded violence, and resorts to verbal violence. He thinks, “I have never firebombed anything and I start wondering how one goes about it—what materials are involved, gasoline, matches...or would it be lighter fluid?”(83). His frustration mounts to rage as “she jabbars back, undaunted, pointing relentlessly at the stains on the sheets.” He responds by modifying his English in a way that conforms to Asian stereotypes in order to deliver an ableist, sexist insult: “‘Stupid bitch-ee? Understand?’ I shout, red-faced, on the verge of tears. I’m shaking and I yank the jacket away from her, muttering, ‘Oh Christ’”(83).

The situation is diffused when a woman from his building comes into the shop, despite its own geographical distance from his usual haunts. His description—that he’s “jolted by the sound of a real voice”—reinforces the scene of encounter with the dry cleaners as containing two distinct realities. The woman from his building, Victoria, who he’s seen “a number of times lingering in the lobby, staring admiringly at me whenever I run into her,” is given the usual appraisal: “she’s older than me, late twenties, okay-looking, a little overweight, wearing a jogging suit—from where, Bloomingdales?” (84). Again, more typically, he has no idea what her name is. She begins by affirming a shared spatial displacement with Patrick: “Isn’t it ridiculous? Coming *all* the way up *here*, but you know they really *are* the best.” When he asks her to moderate in order to help him experience a smoother transaction and get the stains out of his clothes, however, the old man holds up Patrick’s sheet and she murmurs, “Oh my, I see,” and asks ““What *are* those?” She looks at the stains again and says, ‘oh my’.” When he explains the stains as “cranberry juice, cranapple juice,” she nods but says, “It doesn’t look like cranberry, I mean cranapple, to me,” and when he says it’s really chocolate syrup, “she nods, understanding, maybe a hint of skepticism. ‘Oh my’” (84). When Patrick claims he needs to leave, entreating her to fix the situation for him as he moves toward the door, the “Chinese woman starts yapping again, desperately, shaking a finger at me,” but Victoria engages him about the restaurant he’s mentioned, “impressed” and demonstrating her knowledge that “It moved uptown, right?” As he’s moving out of the door, she persists through all of his excuses about unavailability to ask him to lunch, and finally assents when he says he’ll call her. Victoria’s response—nodding, approving, despite sharing the Chinese dry cleaners’ reality that Patrick’s sheets present evidence of blood—highlight the way his interaction with the Chinese woman and her husband are maintaining a misfit between their reality and the one they don’t understand in a shared context, bearing witness, offering recognition, and dissenting.

Though offered paralingually, through facial expression, voice pitch, cadence; gesture, pointing, holding the sheets up as demonstration; and with widened eyes and persistent looking, the Chinese dry cleaners' relation to Patrick insists that "our lives are interconnected," and insists on noticing Patrick and what he has done as drips and stains that should not be washed away. And rather than calling the police or psychiatric authorities to disappear Patrick, they hold him in a space of giving a certain kind of account: it may be that they can't understand him either, but they take up an ethics of insisting that he *should* explain himself, that his experience and what he's communicated with marks in blood can't be passed over, dismissed, or made insignificant.

Patrick leaves this scene, in which he has been unable to witness the dry cleaners' reality, and immediately enters another misfit in which he misrecognizes the situation but is himself recognized and refused. He narrates, "I find myself eyeing a very pretty homeless girl sitting on the steps of a brownstone on Amsterdam, a Styrofoam coffee cup resting on the step below her feet, and as if guided by radar I move toward her, smiling, fishing around in my pocket for change." Though Bateman and his friends routinely stiff and taunt homeless people, this woman's beauty intensifies her "plight" and makes his dry-cleaner "nastiness vanish[]." He "lean[s] in, eyes radiating sympathy into her blank, grave face, and dropping a dollar into the Styrofoam cup [he] say[s], 'Good luck'" (86). Bateman's automatic movement and sincere kindness come after his "boy next door" appearances have failed to convince anyone but an "okay-looking" woman: he has been held in a scene in which he is recognized as having done something ugly, made present as someone whose reality is ugly and not okay. When despite his careful examination he has misrecognized a Columbia college student with a full cup of coffee, she repeats the Chinese dry cleaners' no and, having taken similar stock of him, rejects him in a language he understands: "Hey, what's your goddamn problem?" (86). Also expecting an account (if only rhetorically), this question serves as a kind of translation bridge that resonates with Patrick's experience of being seen and misfitting with the

Chinese dry cleaners: in response to this dissent, Patrick freezes, cringes, stutters, and in the taxi he hails to flee, he tells us, “I hallucinate the buildings into mountains, into volcanoes, the streets becoming jungles, the sky freezes into a backdrop, and before stepping out of the cab I have to cross my eyes in order to clear my vision. Lunch at Hubert’s becomes a permanent hallucination in which I find myself dreaming while still awake” (86). The reality he enters to flee the dissent that translates has little apparent connection to a Columbia student reading Sartre. But it does recall Patrick’s musings about firebombings, as the Chinese woman is saying “something in the same spastic, foreign tongue”: it is the kind of cinematic landscape used to represent the Asian landscapes that were subject to incendiary attacks during the Korean and Vietnam Wars. Though his hallucinations are involuntary, they are self-projections into a lush, grand worldscape that is an explosion of what Patrick imagines to be the *dry cleaners’* worldscape, a dramatic unfurling and takeover of the misfit Patrick experienced in their shop, with all of its recognition and significance, if also refusal.

Mental Distress, Identification

Though it’s a vignette chapter like all of the others, the “Dry Cleaners” chapter extends into a peculiar and disorganized scene in “A Glimpse of Thursday Afternoon,” in which Patrick tells us he is “sweaty and a pounding migraine thumps dully in my head and I’m experiencing a major-league anxiety attack.” His mental distress, physical discomfort, and non-normative behavior are made narratively apparent: he finds himself standing at a phone booth, unsure of who will answer, and when it’s his secretary, he shouts, “*Jean*, I need *help*,” and as she responds by updating him about various lunch dates and plans for drinks, he moans and cries out, “What am I *doing?*” This is a question that expresses an exasperation at pointless, insignificant action on the scale of a life; this meaning is layered with another, an epiphany about bad behavior that had previously not even registered as condemnable. It’s attached most closely here to restaurant reservations and Patrick’s

participation in the white, yuppie lifestyle of social networking and consumption (a lifestyle and a group that most directly benefitted from racialized rhetorics about law and order and the undeserving poor), but can also refer to his compulsion to significant action in the form of harm. When Jean asks him what's wrong, he says, "I'm not going to make it, Jean'," but still attempts to cover over his mental distress by "chok[ing] out, 'to the office this afternoon'"(149). His madness continues to appear as he throws away his Walkman (which "suddenly feels like a boulder strapped around [his] neck"), and licks hair mousse residue greedily off of his hand. As he walks around, doubled over with abdominal pain and foaming at the mouth, he shoplifts a canned ham.

As he stuffs handfuls of the ham into his mouth in the lobby of a fancy office building, his mental distress is appearing in ways that are alarming to read for their misfit with usual public behavior: though the doorman of the office building "at first seems to recognize me," he threatens to call the police once Patrick begins scooping the ham into his mouth. We might remember that Patrick thought the Chinese dry cleaner said she wanted ham during their exchange, and so it's a significant choice for sustaining himself when he is "suddenly ravenous," and for soothing his discomfort, which he has been experiencing as a generalized crisis of needing help, not being okay (150). If consuming the ham is a way of returning to his experience with the Chinese woman, it's also figured here as layering another scene onto the one of care: at the same time that Patrick is inhabiting and satisfying what he imagined to be the dry cleaner's desire as she was noticing him, he is also returning to an interaction with flesh that he takes up when he is manipulating human bodies: the ham he plunges his hands into is "lukewarm, pink meat [that gets] stuck beneath my nails"(150). As he is making a return to recognition and being held in a scene of care and dissent, and as he is bringing his "private dementia" into public view, he and his madness do show up to others (352). In the crowd on the street, his sweating, moaning, and foaming mouth provoke no response, but once

he pops open the tin, the guard takes notice and threatens arrest. Patrick's attempts to return to the scene of care don't, in this sense, work: the guard actually hopes to eject Patrick from the scene.

Patrick bolts, throws up all of the ham, and "stumble[es] uptown, toward home"; as the chapter ends, he attempts another self-soothing consumption at a kosher deli, into which he wanders "without even noticing,[...] still confused, mixed up, sweaty"(152). After gravitating to the establishment this way, Patrick impulsively "grabs the menu away from [the hostess] and rush[es] to a booth up front," where he tries to order a cheeseburger and then a vanilla milkshake. In ordering a cheeseburger and milk shake, Patrick is functioning as if he is back in the McDonald's he went to for a "celebratory drink" after harming a black homeless man named Al and his dog (132). Patrick talks with Al at length, telling him that his "negative attitude" explains his unemployment and housing crisis, then declaring that they have nothing in common and that Al is a loser. After stabbing Al in each eyeball, in the belly and on his hands, also slicing his nose, Patrick reports feeling "heady, ravenous, pumped up"(132). Patrick acts on these feelings by satisfying desires he imagines are Al's: he goes "somewhere Al would go, the McDonald's in Union Square," also taking the vanilla milkshake he orders "to a table up front, where Al would probably sit"(132). So when he takes a seat at the front of the kosher deli and orders up a vanilla milkshake, his consumption practices attempt to re-enact a scene in which he makes himself the recipient of the kind of help Al needs, taking up his non-belonging to white yuppie interchangeability but superficially fixing the deprivations of such a structural position. At the kosher deli, this re-enactment fails.

As at the dry cleaners, Patrick is met with a series of refusals in a language he doesn't understand, refusals that express and generate a sustained scene of care, a misfitting and being noticeable that diverges from Patrick's usual experience of smooth interactions and being interchangeable. And as at the dry cleaners, Patrick responds with racist aggression and ultimately flees from engagement. From the start, Patrick doesn't understand the rules of consumption, though

he attempts to adapt his mode of restaurant going by addressing the hostess of what has only been called a “shabby delicatessen” as Jewish: he walks in, asks for the *maître d’*, and drops the name of a Jewish celebrity (“I know Jackie Mason”) while insisting unnecessarily to the hostess, “a short, fat Jewish woman, old and hideously dressed” that he has a reservation. She sighs and engages with him anyway, telling him that reservations aren’t necessary. Once seated in the front (like the seat at McDonalds where Al would probably sit), he tries to order, but doesn’t understand the rules of consumption or the meaning of the word used over and over to clarify, “Kosher.” As he is ordering a cheeseburger, the waitress says, “I’m sorry, sir,[...] No cheese. Kosher,” so he says, “Fine. A *kosher*burger but *with cheese*, Monterey Jack perhaps,” and she reprises, “No cheese, sir,[...] *Kosher*...”(152). Though his frustration mounts as he tries to order cottage cheese and a vanilla milkshake, she responds, twice: “No milk shake. *Kosher*”(152).

When Patrick continues to ask for a vanilla milk shake and the waitress repeats, “*Kosher*,” Patrick responds with mounting frustration and verbal abuse. His initial awareness of the delicatessen’s Jewishness becomes “Oh god, is this a *nightmare*, you fucking *Jew*?” The waitress responds to this communicative gridlock, this misfit—and to Patrick’s aggression—by fetching the manager to address the issue; Patrick attempts to order up other choices, and at the point when the waitress is breaking from the interaction to get the manager, his thoughts go, desperately, to the “platinum AmEx [that is] already slapped on the greasy table.” As the waitress says, yet again, “No milk shake. *Kosher*,” Patrick describes her as “thick-lipped, just one of billions of people who have passed over this planet.” When the manager approaches, Patrick narrates that he’s “a bald carbon copy of the waitress, [and Patrick] get[s] up and scream[s], ‘Fuck yourself you retarded cocksucking kike,’ and [he] run[s] out of the delicatessen and onto the street”(152).

Despite Patrick’s attempts to shape a particular experience for himself via return and via consumption that adopts the satisfaction that Patrick imagines another person wants, these efforts

are denied, and this scene most directly resonates with the dry cleaners' sustained refusal and recognition, the engaged dissent that makes care. Patrick reacts to being engaged on others' terms by attempting, via racialized typecasting and violent rumination, to insulate his reality from one shared with them. At the kosher deli, Patrick's ostensibly disparaging and disqualifying characterization of the waitress and the manager figure them as fungible carbon-copies, instances of insignificant life flitting across the surface of the planet. These characterizations have a logical rhyme with the mode of perceiving others that accompanies genocidal violence, and with the de-personalization practices instituted in the Nazi mass murder of Jewish people, as individuals were stripped of their hair, clothing, and personal belongings. But it also identifies what is detestable, by Patrick's logic, about being ethnic and thereby disqualifiable—the thing that repels him from the interaction, the being held by these people in a scene of care—as indistinguishability and interchangeability, the terms he has used to describe himself. The symmetry of these terms suggests that Patrick is repelled by the identification with these other people that responsibility to one another in the scene of care generates. His racial insults and departures from the scene of care function to disintegrate the ethical engagement that scene initiates: Patrick craves the significance of noticeability and recognition, but is not yet able or willing to decipher these scenes' demands that he make himself understood, and does not speak the language of giving an account.

Conclusion

Naomi Mandel and others¹⁵⁶ have framed *American Psycho* as belonging to a certain blank generation ethos, one that has a counter-cultural, resistant orientation to an unacceptable status quo, but also a sense that any resistance is futile, especially in the context of “commodity culture and

¹⁵⁶ See also James Annesley, *Blank Fictions: Consumerism, Culture, and the Contemporary American Novel* (New York: Pluto Press, 1998); and Young and Caveney, *Shopping in Space*.

contemporary capitalism's relentless dialectic of articulation and co-option."¹⁵⁷ Mandel elaborates this critical difficulty "the predicament of Blank Generation fiction: there is no outside, no definable enemy to conquer or resist"; and Bret Easton Ellis affirms it when he says that "The things that are accepted in popular culture constantly shock me. But then I'm stuck in this position: What do you do when you're part of it?"¹⁵⁸ Outside of Manhattan, in New Jersey, Patrick learns, a "young stockbroker [...is] arrested and charged with murdering a young Chicano girl and performing voodoo rituals with, well, various body parts," but Patrick is never brought to justice for his actions. This exculpation is not for want of people who can and do recognize the signs of his crimes, but it is enabled by the responses of his peers when he attempts to lay claim to his own particularity by confessing to murder and horrific mutilation. Patrick's white, upper-class peers, described as multiple, interchangeable heaps of designer clothing, ignore his confessions in favor of a continued participation in well-oiled consumer circuits of better and newer places to spend. Patrick's narrative proposes his madness and his compulsion to violence as a response to the depersonalization that accompanies his participation in these circuits of Reagan-era success, and his belonging to its white professional personhood.

This chapter argues that madness and murder are represented as ineffectual responses to the effects of this fitting, given his peers' refusal or inability to register them when they are confessed. Given the novel's self-conscious difficulty, the way it challenges readers' capacity to keep reading with intense, fatiguing detail, with drawn-out dialogues about trivia, and with intricate descriptions of graphic violence—given these challenges to a reader's capacity to remain ethically engaged, it's particularly interesting to linger over the handful of scenes in the novel where Patrick steps outside

¹⁵⁷ Naomi Mandel, Introduction to *Bret Easton Ellis: American Psycho, Glamorama, Lunar Park*, Continuum Studies in Contemporary North American Fiction (New York: Continuum, 2011), 5.

¹⁵⁸ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 10.

of white, professional-class social circles. Though Patrick is never held accountable to the law, these interactions are distinct for their encounters with service-class people of color who recognize Patrick's actions as significant and respond with refusal, thus initiating and sustaining an ethical engagement with him, a scene of care. As these people notice Patrick and his deeds, Patrick's narrative describes an experience of being held to a scene of misfitting. Instead of ticking along parallel tracks of service-and-consumer, these people engage with Patrick as someone who shares a common context with them and thus must explain himself and his actions (and might possibly do so). Ultimately, these scenes don't function as a kind of vigilante sanction and don't actually stop Patrick's violence. Patrick is unable to understand the language by which he is being noticed and being asked to give an account, and he responds by defecting from the scene of care's shared context. He racializes his interlocutors via description and verbal violence and then literally flees the scene. But these scenes of care are not, technically speaking, meaningless. As scenes of dissent, they suspend the smooth functioning of commodity exchange that are normally so well-oiled for a white, male professional, opening up some version of an outside to Patrick's "living hell" and its mental distress. As they hold Patrick to that misfit in order to indict his actions, these scenes sustain ethical engagement in ways that persist when Patrick behaves erratically and shows signs of madness, refusing to conflate madness with culpability or exemption.

CHAPTER FOUR, The Graphic Ordinary: Composing Visual Experiences of Disability and Race in Chris Ware's *Building Stories*

The unique power of literature finds its source in that zone of indeterminacy where former individuations are undone, where the eternal dance of atoms composes new figures and intensities every moment.
(Jacques Rancière, "Deleuze, Bartleby, and the Literary Formula")

[With aesthetics, it] is as though philosophy suddenly wakes up to the fact that there is a dense, swarming territory beyond its own mental enclave which threatens to fall utterly outside its sway. That territory is nothing less than the whole of our sensate life together—the business of affections and aversions, of how the world strikes the body on its sensory surfaces, of that which takes root in the gaze and the guts and all that arises from our most banal, biological insertion into the world. The aesthetic concerns this most gross and palpable dimension of the human, which post-Cartesian philosophy, in some curious lapse of attention, has somehow managed to overlook. It is thus the first stirrings of a primitive materialism—of the body's long inarticulate rebellion against the tyranny of the theoretical.
(Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*)

Writing and drawing are thinking. We're told in school that they're skills but that's wrong. Drawing is a way of thinking. It's a way of seeing.
(Chris Ware, quoted by Dan Raeburn in "The Smartest Cartoonist on Earth")

In April 2008, the Carl Hammer Gallery had an exhibition of Chris Ware's production drawings from "Building Stories," an on-going project at the time. I had written my master's thesis on the *New York Times Magazine* run of "Building Stories" after seeing it at an MCA show: the interpretive conundrum that drew me to Ware's work was the protagonist's prosthetic leg, plainly represented in the visual language of the comic strip, but almost completely glossed over in the verbal register. So, when I read about the exhibit, I took the "L" to the Chicago Brown Line stop, stepped into the gallery, and found myself at the opening. Chris Ware was there, surrounded by patrons holding plastic cups of wine, murmuring chummy adulations. Painfully shy, I eventually managed to approach Ware, and when I blurted out that I had written my Master's thesis on "Building Stories," he said: "Oh, *god*. Why?" When I asked him about the visually present but textually unaddressed disability representation, he said: "Well, I just didn't want to make too big a deal of it."



Figure 1. *Building Stories* box and its 14 pieces in varying formats. Image by Jimmy Stamp, courtesy of Smithsonian.com.

Pantheon released Chris Ware's *Building Stories* in October 2012, a publishing event that generated a great deal of excitement, prompting a flurry of reviews.¹⁵⁹ Part of this excitement has derived from the fact that as an object, *Building Stories* is an unwieldy, genre-bending thing—it's a large cardboard box that collects 14 pieces in varying formats: broadsheets, flip books, bound volumes, magazine and comic book sized booklets, and a gameboard-style accordion piece (fig. 1). Assembling 11 years of work, these pieces include already-published installments about an

¹⁵⁹ The novel has also been awarded many accolades. It is a four-time 2013 Eisner Award Winner: Best Lettering, Best Publication, Best Writer/Artist and Best Graphic Album; the 2013 Lynd Ward Graphic Novel Prize-winner; the 2013 Harvey Award for Excellence in Presentation; it was shortlisted for the Jan Michalski Prize for Literature; it is a *New York Times Book Review* Top 10 Books of the Year; a *Time Magazine* Top Ten Fiction Books of the Year; the *Publishers Weekly* Best Book of the Year; it was included in *Kirkus Reviews*' Top 10 Fiction of 2012; *Newsday*'s Top 10 Books of 2012; *Washington Post*'s Top 10 Graphic Novels of 2012; the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*'s Best Books of the Year; the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*'s Top 10 Fiction Books of the Year; it was named in Amazon.com's Best Books of the Year/Comics; and it was named Boing Boing's Best Graphic Novel of the Year.

anonymous art school graduate who lives on the third story of a Chicago 3-flat, replicated almost intact—the 2005–2006 *New York Times Magazine* “Funny Pages” run and *Acme Novelty Library* 18 (the first as a Little Golden Book and the second as a book bound in a similar green and linen cloth). The other pieces build on and out from these initial installments, expanding the protagonist’s lifeworld into futures and pasts as she ruminates over her life but also gets married and moves to suburban Oak Park to raise a family. Alongside these narratives are other pieces that elaborate fictional worlds (as with stories about an existentially troubled bumblebee that circles the apartment building and later animates stories the protagonist tells her daughter), as well as yet other storylines that tap into the memories and experiences of the protagonist’s neighbors in the 3-flat: a spinster landlady on the first floor, and a dysfunctional couple on the second.¹⁶⁰ These varying stories are not only dispersed across various pieces in differing formats, but they can also be read in any order.¹⁶¹ This open-ended arrangement, together with the novel’s material instantiation as pieces in a box, produces a narrative form that takes the comics page’s potential for multiple spatio-temporal relationships and explodes it into a work that contains and holds together vast combinatorics of possible relationships between moments.¹⁶²

¹⁶⁰ This access may be granted via the protagonist’s imagination. As one of the narratives suggests, the protagonist may be authoring the entire novel and its pieces: in one scene, we see the protagonist writing “Every day” in a blue-lined notebook as she prepares for a creative writing class; later in the same piece, one of the narrative vignettes begins with “Every day”; in the workshop, a peer is critiquing a scene the protagonist has written, which mentions the sound of clinking bottles. This is the sound of a milkman’s carriage going by, remembered by the protagonist’s landlady in yet another installment.

¹⁶¹ Because each piece integrates memory and rumination into present moments, different pieces repeat (or anticipate) scenes that are narrated in real time or memory elsewhere.

¹⁶² As Martha Kuhlman points out, many critics of Ware’s work have noted how his work bends the “left-to-right, top-to-bottom conventions of the Western reader”—including Gene Kannenberg, Thomas Bredehoft and Isaac Cates. “In the Comics Workshop: Chris Ware and the Oubapo,” in *The Comics of Chris Ware: Drawing is a Way of Thinking*, eds. David M. Ball and Martha B. Kuhlman (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 83.

The title *Building Stories* puns on the act of narrating and the centrality of physical buildings to the narrative, and the box design underlines a symmetry between buildings, bodies, and works of art as containers for memories that *Acme Novelty Library* developed when it built onto the *New York Times Magazine* run. As Peter Sattler has argued, *Building Stories* is centrally concerned with representing memories and “allows the building to serve as a literal ‘memory theater.’”¹⁶³ As a box, *Building Stories* is a built space that contains manifold scenes in many pieces and at many narrative times, an aesthetic world that is back-formed from all of its scenes; at the same time, the box is a body containing memories, daydreams, and experiences. The vertebrae building blocks on the box’s “spine” underline the way this text is a form that brings stories, spaces, and bodies into being. The box, like an aesthetic world, like a self, contains multitudes (“I am large, I contain multitudes”).

Building Stories is, formally speaking, a groundbreaking, experimental work, as many critics have been quick to note. But the critical reception has failed to recognize the ways in which the novel’s radical form manages to render “extraordinary bodies” ordinary. The advertising-style copy on the back of the graphic novel’s box hardly makes “too big a deal” of the protagonist’s embodiment as a BTK (below the knee) amputee: it writes that readers will “discover[] a protagonist wondering if she’ll ever move from the rented close-quarters of lonely young adulthood to the mortgaged expanse of love and marriage.”¹⁶⁴ But far from erasing or trivializing disability, the novel’s installments repeatedly materialize the protagonist’s embodiment in panels that depict her in

¹⁶³ Peter R. Sattler, “Past Imperfect: ‘Building Stories’ and the Art of Memory,” in *The Comics of Chris Ware: Drawing is a Way of Thinking*, eds. David M. Ball and Martha B. Kuhlman (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 213.

¹⁶⁴ Chris Ware, *Building Stories* (New York: Pantheon, 2012), n.p. None of the 14 elements enclosed in the box are paginated, though some of the vignettes are titled. Citations will refer to the media formats of each piece as an identifier, and additionally to these titles where applicable.

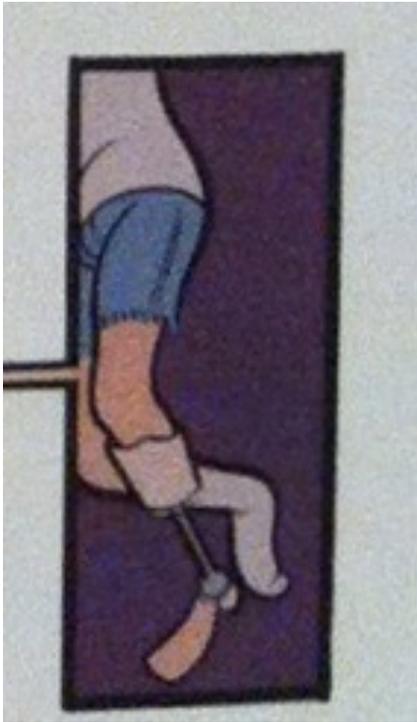


Figure 2. Panel cropped to show the protagonist's lower body. Inset from "Every Day," in clothbound book piece. Chris Ware, *Building Stories*, 2012.

varying states of dress and undress, as well as by panels that turn readers' attention to her legs by virtue of the way they are cropped (fig. 2). And more than the *New York Times Magazine* run, the expanded novel form of *Building Stories* explicitly introduces disability into the textual register of the story's telling: the protagonist remembers her post-amputation recovery, for instance, strangers comment on her leg, and her husband's co-worker thrills that she's like a superhero.

Because her body is marked and remarked as disabled, reviewers can't help but note disability. But they tend to mention it without saying anything substantive, assuming that the protagonist's "one-leggedness" is a stand-in for Ware's signature melancholy or pathos.¹⁶⁵ Ware's critics have

demonstrated a lack of critical imagination about disability, even expressing vexation over how understated the presence of disability is.¹⁶⁶ When such reviewers experience Ware's representation as

¹⁶⁵ Exceptions are Joanna Davis-McElligatt and Daniel Worden, who manage to register the way in which the protagonist's disability is there but not asking for pity, and not represented as catastrophic. See Davis-McElligatt, "Body Schemas," *The Comics Journal*, Oct. 24, 2012, <http://www.tcj.com/body-schemas/> and Worden, "Loss as Life," *The Comics Journal*, Oct. 12, 2012, <http://www.tcj.com/loss-as-life-in-building-stories/>. A third mention takes the protagonist's disability, reductively, to be a stand-in for existential void and melancholia: Cliff Froehlich, "Ware's 'Building Stories' Is Stunning Success," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Oct. 2, 2012, http://www.stltoday.com/entertainment/books-and-literature/reviews/review-ware-s-building-stories-is-stunning-success/article_277db266-0cb1-11e2-b15c-001a4bcf6878.html.

¹⁶⁶ "Even SW[Solitary Woman]'s amputated limb vexed more than moved me. Having chosen to afflict his central character thus, Ware, in my estimation, did little with it. I couldn't help wishing he had ventured more deeply into its implications. [...] little, really, has been made of the loss [...] I would agree with Chekhov that if you are going to hang an amputated leg on the wall when the curtain rises on Act One, it better be stuffed down someone's throat by the end of Act Three." Bob

discomfiting for its uneventfulness, they assume that the representation of disability is the introduction of an extraordinary event, a problem. It's troubling that the critical work on *Building Stories* merely notices disability and drops the subject, and it's troubling that readers may even be vexed by Ware's radical divergence from common representational tropes for disability. These attachments to conventional literary representations of disability risk occluding the innovative ways in which *Building Stories* makes bodies appear, and thus the valuable conceptual work the text is doing.¹⁶⁷

With careful attention to *Building Stories*' form, we can begin to recognize how Ware's text pushes against the grain of conventional ways of visual knowing, interrupting processes of visual reading (iconography) in order to push readers into experiences of looking. I argue that in the expanded, novel-box form of *Building Stories*, Ware is fundamentally concerned with the aesthetic problem of representing putatively extraordinary embodiment in ways that break from conventional perceptions that would "make too big a deal." In taking up this challenge, *Building Stories* does philosophical work on representation, visual experience, and the ways bodies appear. Despite the fact that race is off of the critical radar in most work on *Building Stories*,¹⁶⁸ the graphic novel focalizes

Levin, "Ware and When (and What About It)?," *The Comics Journal*, April 10, 2013, <http://www.tcj.com/ware-and-when-and-what-about-it/>

¹⁶⁷ Charles Hatfield responds in the comments section for Levin's essay: "To say that Ware does little with [her disability] is to ignore many significant episodes in the book. I'm mystified by that claim. He explores it often, and usually matter-of-factly, as an essential part of the woman's character: part of her self-imaging, or self-conception. The way he uses it is not a stunt: it's another part of his effort to extend the attention of comics into little-explored areas of everyday experience."

¹⁶⁸ An exception is Matt Godbey's essay on gentrification in Chicago, "Chris Ware's 'Building Stories,' Gentrification, and the Lives of/in Houses." Writing about the *New York Times Magazine* run of "Building Stories," Godbey necessarily focuses on racialized and classed urban spaces and how those spaces are erased and reshaped by capital. Godbey's analysis remains focused on the cultural geographies invoked by the buildings and neighborhoods represented in Ware's narrative, rather than its representation of racialized bodies.

its formal project around representations of blackness as well as around representations of disability, populating the aesthetic world of the novel with bodies that are visually coded as black bodies.

Disability and race, specifically blackness, function in *Building Stories* as analogous representational problems and experiences of being visually eventful. While parts of my argument will be interested in how the text suggests that disability *is like* race, and vice versa, I am most interested in how both kinds of embodiment present similar representational challenges and how the novel negotiates them.

In *Waist-High in the World: A Life Among the Nondisabled*, Nancy Mairs re-writes a scene of racial hyper/invisibility and visual dys-appearance from Frantz Fanon, in which Fanon hears a child say, “Look! A Negro!” and laughter turns to distress as he realizes that an entire racist history of meaning is being read onto his body.¹⁶⁹ As she catches sight of herself in the mirror, Mairs writes, “‘Eek,’ I squealed, ‘a cripple!’ I was laughing, but as is usually the case, my humor betrayed a deeper, darker reaction[...] I’m invariably shocked at the sight of myself hunched in [my wheelchair’s] black framework of aluminum and plastic.”¹⁷⁰ From 18th century curiosity cabinets, to 19th century freak shows and 20th century telethons, to 21st century inspiration porn,¹⁷¹ disabled bodies have a long history of being spectacle. Black bodies have a different but equally long history of being spectacle in American culture: in freak shows as “missing links” or so-called savages, but perhaps more familiarly in the context of slavery and anti-racist struggle. Black bodies were displayed as objects for sale;

¹⁶⁹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 112.

¹⁷⁰ Nancy Mairs, *Waist-High in the World: A Life Among the Nondisabled* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 46.

¹⁷¹ “Inspiration porn” is a term for the many, widely-circulated images of disabled people that are designed to inspire non-disabled people. Rosemarie Garland Thomson’s essay on visual rhetorics outlines two of its major genres: the sentimental and the wondrous (the supercrip). ““The Politics of Staring: Visual Rhetorics of Disability in Popular Photography,” in *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*, eds. Rosemarie Garland Thomson, Brenda Brueggeman, and Sharon Snyder (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2002), 59–66. There is also a long history of disabled people begging for money on the streets—injured by industrial work, injured in American wars, or excluded from the labor force and stable housing because of mental or physical impairment.

Enlightenment and 19th century science set itself the task of discerning racial inferiority in observable, physiological traits; abolitionists displayed scarred black bodies to move audiences to action; and under Jim Crow, souvenir photographs of lynchings were circulated widely, spectacles of the black body subdued. These bodies register as eventful because of these visual traditions, because of a long history of disqualification, and because of cultural projects invested in distinguishing them from the invisible white, nondisabled norm.¹⁷² *Building Stories* raises the question of whether it's possible to make disabled and black bodies appear without reinscribing the alterity that representational conventions have associated with particular visual details: whether and how embodied difference might be loosened from its eventfulness and made visible as variation that belongs to a scene.

Ware and others have acknowledged that he is tackling this representational project with narrative and visual tools that, for all their flexibility, are also historically grounded in understandings of disability and race as sub- or ab-normal in ways that can be difficult to control. Ware has related an early experience with comics' dependence on racial representation when he was drawing characters for a strip in the University of Texas' newspaper:

Entirely unconsciously, I designed these characters as people or “non-animals” with black heads and big white mouths, like Mickey Mouse without ears. Before I knew it, the Black Student Alliance was writing these nasty letters to the student newspaper demanding big apologies [...] Suddenly, I realized that I actually had done these horrible racist caricatures, and that I wasn't even aware of it. I felt terrible, and when I examined it, I realized a great part of the “visual rush” of comics is at least partially, if not almost entirely, founded in racist caricature. If you look at many early comic strips, they're endemically “ethnic.” Abie the Agent is obviously a Jewish caricature. Happy Hooligan is an Irish caricature. And black caricatures obviously go back to the minstrel days and earlier. Even Mickey Mouse...what is

¹⁷² This distinction often functioned to “protect” that white, nondisabled American citizen from bodily (genetic) contamination. See Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell, “The Eugenic Atlantic: Disability and the Making of an International Science,” in *Cultural Locations of Disability* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006). Blackness has also historically been tied to cognitive disability and psychological disability.

he doing with white gloves? Gee, I wonder where that comes from. The simplification of the face comes out of an effort to distill a particular identity down to a few simple features, and that includes racial identity. It's creepy when you think about it.¹⁷³

Joanna Davis-McElligatt reads these reflections as Ware's awareness that his precarious control over the meaning of his images "had everything to do with the uneasy slippage between the language of comics and the long history of racial representation both within and outside the comics world."¹⁷⁴

Indeed, comics has long depended on racial stereotype for its iconographic conventions. As Art Spiegelman has written, "It takes skill to use such clichés [the visual symbols and clichés cartoon language depends on] in ways that expand or subvert this impoverished vocabulary."¹⁷⁵

Representing disability apart from its usual cultural alignment with the body in crisis, enfreakment, or epiphany presents a similar challenge. Disability is often a problem that inaugurates a story, an affliction or tragedy to be resolved by rehabilitation or death. As Rosemarie Garland Thomson, Brenda Brueggeman and Sharon Snyder write in their introduction to *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*, "disability tends to be figured in cultural representations as an absolute state of otherness that is opposed to a standard, normative body, unmarked by either individual form and function or by the particulars of its history."¹⁷⁶ David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder have called conventional literary representations of disability "narrative prosthesis," arguing that literary discourse habitually depends on disability: disability saturates literary narrative as a stock trait for

¹⁷³ Andrea Juno, "Chris Ware," *Dangerous Drawings: Interviews with Comix and Graphix Artists* (New York: Juno Books, 1997), 58.

¹⁷⁴ Joanna Davis-McElligatt, "Confronting the Intersections of Race, Immigration, and Representation in Chris Ware's Comics," in *The Comics of Chris Ware: Drawing is a Way of Thinking*, eds. David M. Ball and Martha B. Kuhlman (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 139.

¹⁷⁵ Art Spiegelman, "Drawing Blood: Outrageous Cartoons and the Art of Outrage," *Harper's Magazine* (June 2006): 45.

¹⁷⁶ Rosemarie Garland Thomson, Brenda Brueggeman, and Sharon Snyder, "Introduction: Integrating Disability into Teaching and Scholarship," in *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*, eds. Rosemarie Garland Thomson, Brenda Brueggeman, and Sharon Snyder (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2002), 2.

characterization that signals the deep evil, tragedy, or comedy of a character; or it functions as an opportunistic metaphoric device, standing in for social or individual collapse.¹⁷⁷ Representationally, disability is usually eventful.

In understanding *Building Stories*' core representational project as one of rendering ordinary disability and race, I invoke ordinariness not just as an arena—those spaces that are most inhabited, “the landscape closest to us, the world most immediately met”¹⁷⁸—but also as an aesthetic quality opposed to the lightning-rod intensity of attention expressed by “Look! A Negro!” or “Eek! A cripple!”¹⁷⁹ As such, I understand the stakes of Ware’s formal experimentation to be nothing less than imaginatively forging ways of recognizing race and disability representationally as belonging to “the whole of our sensate life together” rather than as radical alterity (Eagleton 13). I argue that *Building Stories* manages not to “make too big a deal” not by substituting an alternate iconography (that is, not by drawing with a certain style), but by exploiting the possibilities of form. *Building Stories* negotiates comics’ potential to build stories with both word and image; it composes a set of relations between varying appearances for race and disability; and it foregrounds what Wittgenstein would call visual experiences, experiences of changing seeings-as for disability and race. As it makes perceptual practices perceptible, Ware’s text makes variations in the event of seeing manifest on the page,

¹⁷⁷ David T. Mitchell, “Narrative Prosthesis and the Materiality of Metaphor,” *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*, eds. Brenda Brueggeman, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, and Sharon Snyder (New York: Modern Language Association, 2002): 15–16. By Mitchell’s account, the problem with both of these familiar literary tropes for disability is that while stories capitalize on the symbolic potency of disability’s putative extraordinariness, they do not explore disability as a lived experience with social and political dimensions. Worse, they cause the literary operation of “open-endedness” (discursive self-reflexivity and multiplicity) to shut down; elsewhere I develop a case against this understanding of disability representation as only ever an anti-literary intrusion of ableist socio-cultural understanding.

¹⁷⁸ Ben Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 1.

¹⁷⁹ Again, this eventfulness or intense attention-drawing is an effect of perceptual habit grounded in historical anxieties about the discernibility of difference and policing the boundaries between white nondisabled bodies and black or disabled bodies.

undercutting the coherent “aspects” that conventional perception provokes.¹⁸⁰ To use Chris Ware’s articulation, *Building Stories* uses narrative form and shifts in drawing style to orchestrate shifts between reading (which is governed by the conventions of signs) and looking.

My explication of *Building Stories*’ representational project focuses on four compositional and narrative strategies for rendering ordinary disability and race. First, as disabled and black bodies are materialized across multiple panels, they are compositionally and narratively de-dramatized. Second, I turn to scenes where Ware’s text calls attention to disabled and racial figures’ status as images that elicit dominant seeings-as, and then, by virtue of particular figures’ relationship to other figures, it complicates the comprehensiveness of these aspects’ referential power to that which is contained in and across moments.¹⁸¹ In a third set of readings, I attend to how *Building Stories* depicts characters’ readings of others’ bodies as eventful, readings that unfold narratively in incoherent ways. Finally, I read how *Building Stories* recalibrates what’s seen-as disability and what’s seen-as race via visual resonances that complicate the usual family resemblances between bodies. Disability and race are not represented here as distinct, stable entities signified by corresponding distinct, stable signs, but rather as patterns or sets of relations—“events, actions, and encounters between bodies.”¹⁸² Ware’s

¹⁸⁰ To use Wittgenstein’s terminology, Ware’s text undercuts perceptual practices of *regarding* disability and race, where *regarding* names perceptual states that are continuous “attitudes” toward each aspect. As Jonathan Friday’s gloss of Wittgenstein underlines, “imagination has a role to play in some aspect-dawning experiences, but not in ordinary continuous visual awareness of the subject matter of unambiguous pictures. Indeed, the role imagination plays in aspect dawning experiences provides another criterion for distinguishing such visual experiences from the continuous seeing of an aspect.” Jonathan Friday, “Wittgenstein and the Visual Experience of Depiction,” *Esthetica: Tijdschrift voor Kunst et Filosofie* (2011), <http://estheticatijdschrift.nl/wp-content/uploads/sites/175/2014/09/4-Esthetica-WittgensteinandtheVisualExperienceofDepiction-2011-10-17.pdf>

¹⁸¹ Taking Quine’s notion of theory as something for which “reference is nonsense except relative to a coordinate system,” Thomas Pavel asserts that “like theories, fictional texts refer as systems.” *Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 25.

¹⁸² Jasbir Puar, “‘I Would Rather Be a Cyborg Than a Goddess’: Becoming-Intersectional in Assemblage Theory,” *philoSOPHIA* 2, no. 1 (2012): 58.

text thus pushes readers to experience a “variation to variation” of identity¹⁸³ that enables shifting and multiple forms of aesthetically-mediated belonging.



Figure 3. Protagonist at an art school critique. From the clothbound book piece. Chris Ware, *Building Stories*, 2012.

Focalizing the Event: Bodies in a Scene

As *Building Stories*' narratives build, the comics panel proliferates the protagonist's disabled body and various black bodies via repetition that continually re-presents them from different spatial and temporal locations. Playing with page design and a visual repertoire that takes cues from “architectural blueprints, electrical diagrams, maps, and catalogs,”¹⁸⁴ Ware's style is composed of clear, precise lines and blocks of unmodulated color.¹⁸⁵ As I've argued elsewhere, *Building*

Stories' scenes set up a visual tension between reporting mundane details (crumbs on the floor, grocery store fruit displays, electrical cords and outlets) and iconicized, ideogrammatic renderings (fig. 3).¹⁸⁶ In these material instantiations of bodies across panels, disability and race appear and disappear, moving in and out of focus.

¹⁸³ Insisted on by Jasbir Puar, after Deleuze and Guattari. Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Gene Kannenberg, Jr., “The Comics of Chris Ware,” in *A Comics Studies Reader*, eds. Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 307.

¹⁸⁵ As Katherine Roeder notes, Ware's style shares Winsor McCay's “clarity of form, his emphasis on linearity and flat areas of color outlined in black, and his architectural approach to page composition.” “Seeing Inside-Out in the Funny Pages,” *American Art* 25.1 (Spring 2011): 26.

¹⁸⁶ As Scott McCloud famously explains, simplification amplifies comics representation, while greater detail discourages identification by increasing the represented object's particularity (and, I would argue, its opacity, as it becomes surface, not idea). In an interview, Ware has said, “fundamentally, you're better off using ideograms rather than realistic drawings. [...] There's a vulgarity to showing

One way to talk about the effect of these shifting focalizations is to say that figures are not always *represented-as* disabled or *represented-as* racialized figures. Nelson Goodman differentiates between *representation-as* and denotation, where the former names what kind of picture it is and the latter names what a picture refers to. His example is “an ordinary portrait of the Duke and Duchess of Wellington,” which denotes the couple and, in part, the Duke. Goodman later concludes that “if k is a suchandsuch, the picture represents a (or the) suchandsuch, but not necessarily *as* a (or the) suchandsuch. To represent the first Duke of Wellington is to represent Arthur Wellesley and also to represent a soldier, but not necessarily to represent him *as* a soldier; for some pictures of him are civilian-pictures.”¹⁸⁷ As the protagonist’s body is drawn over and over again, panel after panel, the repetition denotes her body in all of its multiplicity,¹⁸⁸ loosening this denotation from an overdetermined *representation-as* disabled.

Certain panels represent the protagonist as disabled, foregrounding her short leg or her particular style of climbing the stairs, for example. But in the many panels where the protagonist is depicted from the shoulders up, or wearing pants that make her legs indistinguishable from one another, disability effectively disappears. In other scenes, disability is present in a related material culture of crutches and prosthetics, shower stools and stocking caps; or when the protagonist lies on her bed wearing only a t-shirt and her prosthetic, *representation-as* disabled and *representation-as*

something as you really see it and experience it. It sets up an odd wall that blocks the reader’s empathy.” Daniel Raeburn, *Chris Ware* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 18.

¹⁸⁷ Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976), 30.

¹⁸⁸ Goodman rebuts the thought that one might copy an object, on grounds that objects are much too multiple and complex to begin to “get down” in terms of resemblance. He writes: “for the object before me is a man, a swarm of atoms, a complex of cells, a fiddler, a friend, a fool, and much more.[...] If all are ways the object is, the none is *the* way an object is. I cannot copy all these at once; and the more nearly I succeeded, the less would the result be a realistic picture”(6). Visually this multiplicity happens as well, as the protagonist changes hairstyles, as her body fluctuates and ages, and in the shifts in the phenomenology of memory that render certain moments with significantly greater detail.

feminine sexual object vie for attention.



Figure 4. The protagonist jogs past tourists at the Frank Lloyd Wright Home and Studio. From the Oak Park newspaper piece. Chris Ware, *Building Stories*, 2012.



Figure 5. Panel of the protagonist approaching the tourist group. From the Oak Park newspaper piece. Chris Ware, *Building Stories*, 2012.

In other moments, *Building Stories* shapes our visual encounter compositionally. The only other visibly disabled person in the entire novel is compositionally and narratively de-emphasized: as the protagonist jogs past a group of tourists on the sidewalk in front of Frank Lloyd Wright's home

and studio, the protagonist's irritation—and the panel's composition—is focused on a man who the protagonist groups with “half the men who live here [that] have the same late-Hemingway white beards and stupid safari jackets...”(fig. 4). On the next page, the protagonist is compositionally centered, with the tourists looking toward her on either side as they snap to attention

and move out of her way. Behind the late-Hemingway-beard tourist and his wife, the profile of a leg positioned on a wheelchair footrest is visible—but extremely easy to miss (fig. 5).

In a different kind of compositional control over bodies’ significance, a black man and his daughter are made spatially prominent, even central, but color and narrative emphasis keep them from hermeneutically taking over the narrative. “That Girl” is a vignette about witnessing a young



Figure 6. “That Girl,” a narrative of an emotional woman at an airport. In the clothbound book piece. Chris Ware, *Building Stories*, 2012.

white woman’s extreme public display of emotion as she says goodbye to her boyfriend at the airport (fig. 6). The story is explicitly about attention and even about skin color, as the girl’s face is

deeply flushed, colored pink in an overwhelmingly brown, cream, and beige scene: “That Girl/sure attracted a lot of attention.../She was crying uncontrollably...her face pink, shining with tears.” At the center of the three initial panels is a black man and his daughter standing in front of the protagonist in line; in the very first panel, he is framed by the two main characters of the scene’s drama: the protagonist and “that girl,” both of whom stand out from the scene visually by virtue of color. In the second row of panels, the man is half visible in the far left of each scene, until the third panel zooms out to a longer view and we can see him crouching down to talk to his daughter (perhaps reprimanding her).¹⁸⁹ He disappears until another zoom out in the bottom row, where again he stands in front of the protagonist in line and vanishes for the final two panels, which show the protagonist sitting in the airplane, continuing to ruminate on “that girl.” The protagonist’s final rumination, “we were all so deeply envious of her” is given enormous narrative weight first, by being the punchline; second, by appearing in a panel after the only totally silent panel on the page; and third, because the protagonist thinks this thought after significant time has elapsed, as is evident from the fact that she has been served an in-flight soda. In terms of his position, the man is a body waiting beside the protagonist’s body, passing through and disappearing from the narrative. In terms of line, he is rendered in the extremely iconicized reserved for bystanders, a kind of peripheral vision (no eyes, just the outline of a face, ears, and nose). More strikingly, because the scene uses beige, brown, and tan for the background and all of the figures except the protagonist and the crying girl, the initial visual experience created by his position in the midst of the action shifts to one in which, despite the fact that he participates in the scene’s only visible subplot, he becomes part of the airport scenery. The protagonist’s verbal narration is more concerned with the pink-skinned figure than the brown-skinned one, as race goes without saying. And though the racialized bodies are visually

¹⁸⁹ We also see the line where the protagonist’s prosthetic meets her flesh, as she’s wearing a skirt.

centered at the outset, they are compositionally embedded in the scene via color.

Ableist Disability Projects in Formation

Two dominant understandings of what disability means surface across *Building Stories*' narratives: disability as something that makes a body undesirable, and disability as broken embodiment or debility. These are familiar, ableist readings of the protagonist's short leg: in her introductory essay to *Feminist Disability Studies*, Kim Q. Hall writes that "the assumption that disabled people cannot be sexual beings is a feature of disability oppression," and one of disability's inaugural critiques was of an understanding of the disabled body as a defiled able body in need of rehabilitation or cure.¹⁹⁰ To rather heavy-handedly adapt Omi and Winant's racial formation theory to disability, I understand these "common sense" understandings as interpretations of what disability means and how that meaning organizes everyday experience. As such, these understandings are disability projects that direct two "ways in which, often unconsciously, we 'notice' [disability]."¹⁹¹ Omi and Winant develop the concept of the racial project in order to talk about how the meaning of race is multiple and dynamic as various racial projects "add up" to race as an always in-process formation. As Ware's text represents ableist projects that understand disability as antithetical to desirability and capacity, these understandings linger just below the verbal register, never quite getting articulated outright, but rather becoming present as the subtext to particular verbal events, or particular clusters of visual elements. *Building Stories* experiments with page design, represented forms of seeing, and the relationship between text and image in order to affirm these projects as having real consequence. These formal orchestrations also to represent them in relation to other disability

¹⁹⁰ Kim Q. Hall, "Reimagining Disability and Gender through Feminist Disability Studies: An Introduction," in *Feminist Disability Studies*, ed. Kim Q. Hall (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 4.

¹⁹¹ Michael Omi and Harold Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2015), 58.

projects: the many moments where disability disappears from view, and a constellation of moments that suggest other readings of disability entirely. These moments, too, work quietly alongside suggestions of brokenness and undesirability, such that these variations play off of one another almost entirely in the visual register of the comic strip. By invoking ableist disability projects and representing them as beside¹⁹² other projects, *Building Stories*' form undermines their exclusive hold on what disability can mean.

The pieces of *Building Stories* that narrate the protagonist's experiences after art school—the clothbound book, the Little Golden Book, and the accordion gameboard piece—raise the question of the protagonist's desirability most directly, if not explicitly.¹⁹³ Folding out into four sections, the gameboard piece shows four views of the protagonist's apartment building in varying seasons of the year, each one focusing on the inhabitants of one of the stories.¹⁹⁴ The protagonist's story is one of primping and going to meet a date procured with a personal ad, eventually being stood up, returning

¹⁹² I'm using this rather specific term in order to articulate a relationship between the parts of this complex of meanings that doesn't take these common sense articulations to "win out" or even get "stamped out"; I care that these ableist articulations don't get the last word, but I'm also not exactly saying that the effect of having counternarratives to these common sense projects produces a counternarrative overall. In the ordinary, including the ordinaries of aesthetic worlds, we get bodily variation that is not to be interpreted as a radically "other" condition (as these projects suggest) but as something that gives shape to a particular and ever-shifting manner of being in relation with the world. I borrow "besideness" from Eve Sedgwick's effortsto "explore some ways around the topos of depth or hiddenness," as a preposition that "offers some useful resistance to the ease with which *beneath* and *beyond* turn from spatial descriptors into implicit narratives of, respectively, origin and telos." *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 8.

¹⁹³ In a dark, circular representation of a moment when the protagonist contemplates suicide, the thought bubble "my disgusting bloated body" finishes two thoughts: if I kill myself, who will find my body, and "I'm never going to meet anybody who will love me anyway.../Isn't there anyone who will be able to tolerate/my disgusting bloated body?" Here, the protagonist's body is the thing that carries a life not worth living, the cause and effect of a deep depression. This diagram appears on the inside cover of the clothbound book.

¹⁹⁴ The first panel focuses on the protagonist, who lives on the third floor; the second focuses on the couple living on the second floor; the third on the landlady who lives on the first floor, and the fourth shows a scene, repeated elsewhere in *Building Stories*, where the protagonist releases a bee trapped in the basement laundry room and then chats with the couple on the front stoop, as the landlady looks on.

to her apartment, and going to bed. Based on the red clocks that punctuate the page, the whole narrative occurs between the hours of 6:50pm and 10:10pm (fig. 7).

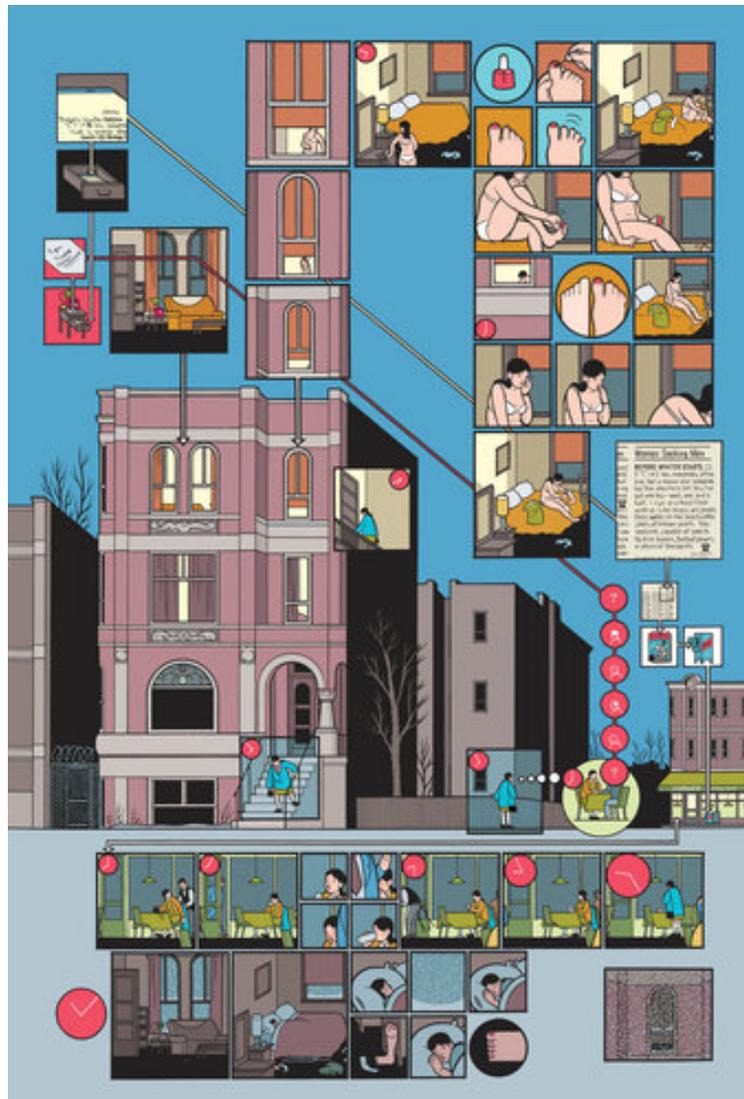


Figure 7. Winter blind date segment (overview). From the gameboard piece. Chris Ware, *Building Stories*, 2012.

The first panels show the protagonist's telephone table, where we are given access to two texts—a heavily revised, handwritten draft of a personal ad, and a note about a confirmed date, as an arrow takes us across the unfolding story of the protagonist's preparation for that date to the final, printed copy of the personal ad. These are the lone instances of any articulated, verbal sense making in what is largely a silent comic, and the draft especially is revealing more as an index of a process of

self-articulation than an actual statement. It reads: “Before winter begins [crossed out, changed to ‘starts’], 5’7” 140 [crossed out, changed to ‘142’] lbs., reason... Not a movie star [with a crossed out ‘but I hope’]”(fig. 8). This draft is a self-composition with a certain agenda—to create a snapshot of who the protagonist is that will create interest and desire in potential suitors. The voice of the ad is

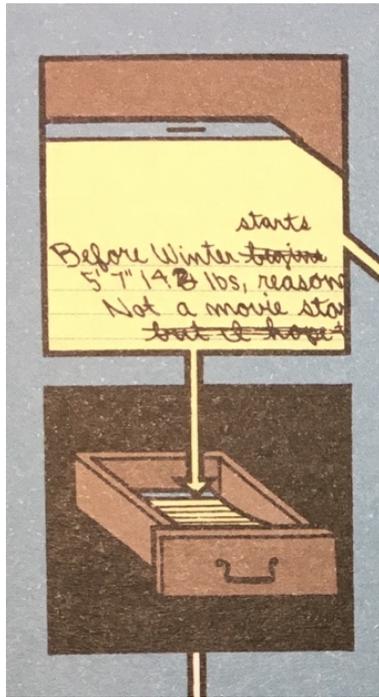


Figure 8. Inset showing a drafted personal ad. Chris Ware, *Building Stories*, 2012.

halting and uncertain—what is the difference, really, between “begins” and “starts”? We see the same self-scrutiny and uncertainty in the panels that follow, as the protagonist stands in her underwear before a mirror, looking at her profile, her hand on her stomach. The draft includes a curious two-pound edit of her weight, a gesture of verisimilitude and particularity. We get the sense that she doesn’t want to overpromise and under-deliver, a move that reveals a sense that two pounds makes a difference that means something. Especially because “but I hope” is crossed out and, as we find out later, replaced with “but few amputees are,” this hesitation and specification suggests a conflicting desire to self-edit, censor, conceal and to “lay it all out there,” disclose,

reveal. Here, disability understood as undesirable makes itself present as an unspoken implication: rather than “surprise” a suitor with her disability, the protagonist chooses to note it up-front, attached to a statement that is explicitly about modesty and expectation adjustment, if only implicitly about disability.

As the protagonist continues her preparation for the date, disability comes into focus visually in a different variation. We see her engaging in a feminine ritual of self-adornment as she paints her toenails a bright vermillion, a color that stands out compositionally against a page composed mostly

of muted browns, oranges, and greens.¹⁹⁵ She paints her big toe; the next small panel shows her view of the painted toe, and the next shows her wiggling her toes—a series immersing us in the process of cosmetic intervention, beholding, and then, ostensibly, pleasure, as she moves on to paint the rest of her toes. So far, the personal ad draft and the protagonist’s body as repeated in these

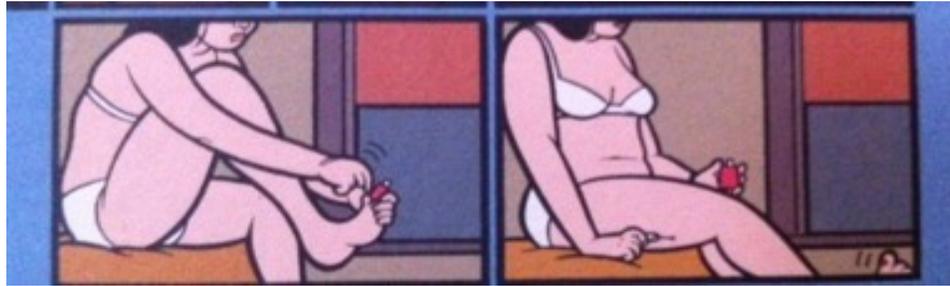


Figure 9. Inset of the protagonist applying toenail polish. Chris Ware, *Building Stories*, 2012.

panels do not represent the protagonist *as* disabled—her 142 pounds’ smooth curves, B-cup breasts and belly-squeezed navel are the focus of many of these panels, as she’s shown with her head and her knees cut off by the frame (fig. 9).

A round panel in the middle of this narrative, however, stages a direct encounter with her disability. Its round shape is distinct from most of the other panels, and visually resonates with things like peepholes, microscope views, or the images created by old-fashioned, long-exposure cameras, which are all associated with intent beholding. In this particular panel, we pause over a view of her painted foot next to the foot on her prosthetic. They’re a pair with a discrepancy, which we are encouraged to notice by virtue of their visual juxtaposition—her prosthetic has a slightly lighter flesh tone, its toes are more regularly shaped, and it doesn’t have the five vermillion nails. This moment is the kind of moment Ware is adept at creating, and which is so conceptually fertile—

¹⁹⁵ Vermillion crops up in two other instances on this page-panel, and both are associated with possible connection: the telephone table, where the solicitous ad is stored and where calls are taken, and the red clocks marking time as it approaches the scene of encounter (and watches it pass by).

the difference between her darling women's-magazine toes and her prosthetic is very much there, but because it's presented in a silent narrative that proceeds entirely without dialogue, it's literally and aesthetically very quiet (verbal representation is itself only available via visual representation, and it's not something said aloud). There is no commentary about the difference, let alone any sort of plunging into despair; it's certainly not a moment of her feminine efforts being foiled. In the next panel, we see her sitting on her bed checking out her feet; in the following sequence, she scratches her face, then has an idea, and bends over. The toenail polish scene ends with another long shot of her sitting on her bed, her prosthetic removed.

I'd like to suggest here that in a number of ways the comics medium is working to render this prosthetic-centered scene such that the protagonist's disability has a palpable presence that can exist apart from the kind of ideological baggage that often accompanies representations of disability. Again, rendered with the same level of iconicity as other objects —black outline filled with unmodulated blocks of color—the protagonist's prosthetic limb is incorporated visually into the general aspect of the scene. The fly-on-the-wall shots, intercalated with close-ups from the protagonist's point of view, give us a controlled encounter with her limbs that puts them outside of the frame; puts them in a view that also contains pillows, a laid out dress, and a sock on the floor; or puts them in an intimate encounter of direct looking. The visual rendering of disability is also interacting in these panels with the cosmetic ritual of toe-nail painting (which is the narrative focus) and with the protagonist's semi-nude body (which is also presented for us to look at). Toenail painting gives us a reason to look at the prosthetic, and on a first date in winter, it's a self-aestheticization that, as a desirability-building practice, might be called pointless or wildly

optimistic.¹⁹⁶ But the wiggle of the toes and the dilated, round-framed moments of consideration embed the prosthetic in a ritual of self-care that generates pleasure for the protagonist and bolsters her for her meeting with an unknown, evaluative masculine gaze. The protagonist's pre-date nudity orients the narrative about a blind date toward her anticipation about whether or not she could be the object of someone's sexual desire, and this question is posed by the visual narrative most directly in terms of her feminine body, specifically, her 142 pounds. The question of disability and desirability hovers.

Directly after this toenail-painting scene, we are presented with the final draft of the personal ad, in published form:

Before Winter Starts: 27, 5'7," 142 lbs., reasonably attractive. Not a movie star lookalike, but few amputees are. Yes, I've got one leg—well, one and a half. I live in a third floor walk-up. Like: music, art, books. Hate: walks on the beach, coffee jokes, all known sports. You: sentient, capable of speech. No kick boxers, football players, or physical therapists.

This ad is conspicuous in its low expectations (sentient, capable of speech) and its preoccupation with disability as something that needs to be explicitly noted. "Not a movie star lookalike" on account of being an amputee is a logical nonsequitur, since few people, amputees or not, are movie-star lookalikes. The protagonist's offhand introduction of the fact that she's an amputee, plus the elaboration, ends up taking up an inordinate amount of space in such a short ad to really be off-hand, and the third-floor walk up sentence is neutral personal information that in fact acts to challenge any assumptions about her mobility. What we're witnessing here is a severely compressed expression of self that is trying to take on the challenges of stigma management, a complex process, as Erving Goffman has explicated. After the visual narrative of being with the protagonist's body

¹⁹⁶ The date would be going well, that is, if in midwinter a potential partner got the chance to see her toenails.

and prosthetic in an intimate way, this apparent nervousness about her prosthetic's ability to skew a dating interaction recasts the question of her sexual desirability in terms of her disability just at the moment that the visual narrative shows her disembarking from her apartment to go on the date.

This new question of how much her disability matters, really, doesn't get easily swatted away by the unfolding of the story, nor is it ever confirmed as the narrative ticks silently along. She leaves, according to the red clock, twenty minutes early when she is meeting her date a block from her apartment, which makes her seem overeager or nervous. As she finishes descending her front stoop ten minutes later, however, overeagerness comes into view as habitual knowledge of how her body moves. Sitting down promptly at 8pm, we watch her as time passes, until an hour and twenty minutes later, she puts on her coat and leaves. With her disability most recently primed with respect to her desirability, the narrative might be suggesting that her leg is in fact (however unjustly) prohibitive in her search for love. But as she waits, her disability isn't re-markable at all, visually obscured by the tablecloth at the restaurant. If her date came and saw her and decided to leave, it was not on the basis of her disability.



Figure 10. Final row of the Winter Blind Date segment: the protagonist returns to her apartment and goes to sleep. Chris Ware, *Building Stories*, 2012.

As she lays in bed, trying to fall asleep as falling snow blankets her windowsill, we join her in trying to make sense of her disappointment (fig. 10). Her prosthetic, removed, occupies two of these panels. The last narrative panel, a circle again, zooms in on the toes to reveal that she had painted vermillion nails onto her prosthetic, too. In a darkened room, after the nonconsummation

of her date, this is an image of self-care and unspoken investment in what might have been. We are left with the overwhelming sense that despite the “I hope that” scratched out and suppressed from



Figure 11. Inset of the protagonist discovering nude portraits of her body. From the clothbound book piece. Chris Ware, *Building Stories*, 2012.

the personal ad draft, the protagonist was attached to the promise of a sexual partner. Its disappointment is almost more devastating because it’s impossible to determine if the whole thing was a prank, with its undertones of disability-based malice, or if the potential suitor had just not wanted to go through with the date for some reason other than her disability. In this particular scene, I’ve been arguing, the iconicity of comics’ visual language and the potential for extremely dilated time across moment-to-moment panel transitions manages to hold together multiple potential meanings for the protagonist’s body. And it does so in a silent simultaneity of moments that raise actual-world disability projects that equate disability and non-desirability without ever quite saying, also offering other

explanations for her non-desirability as well as intimate visual experiences of her body.

The protagonist’s concerns about disability’s compatibility with desirability is also brought up, memorably, in the green, clothbound *Acme Novelty Library 18* narrative where she works as a nanny after art school. This narrative presents one of the novel’s most overt ableist microaggressions: shortly after the protagonist inadvertently discovers that the boy she cares for has an erection during a tickle fight, the boy’s father “lets her go,” explaining that he and his wife had hoped that their pre-teen son wouldn’t get “overly attached.” While the rationale for this hope is left unstated in the textual register, the next panel is a cropped view of the protagonist’s legs and prosthetic. In this set of moments, the protagonist responds with anger and indignation, despite

other scenes, such as the blind date scene, that suggest that she understands this understanding of her body to be a real possibility. The visual narrative of the protagonist’s daily nannying duties argues against the parents’ misguided hope, as well, depicting the protagonist in the conventionally sexualizing trope of the “wet t-shirt contest” as they’re washing the car, for example. Most interesting is the narrative’s inclusion of a represented seeing-the-protagonist-as sexual: the protagonist finds a series of index cards on which the boy has drawn pornographic images. These drawn images are legible as the expression of ordinary sexual curiosity, a first impression that then integrates the realization that these images are realistic to their referent, having a short leg like the protagonist (fig. 11).

Building Stories’ quiet complications of conventional disability projects don’t only happen in



Figure 12. “Every day,” a clothed anatomy page layout (overview). From the clothbound book piece. Chris Ware, *Building Stories*, 2012.

terms of sexual desirability—there are other moments where different interpretations of the protagonist’s body get imbricated on the page. A series from the clothbound volume that replicates *Acme Novelty Library 18*, in particular, plays with our expectations for the protagonist’s disability as debility by putting her on display in the style of a medicalized specimen—three pages that mimic the acetate overlays in an encyclopedia’s anatomy section. On the first page, where the protagonist is shown fully dressed, the arrows arrayed around her body point most directly to her prosthetic, her stomach, and her heart

(fig. 12). The large text reads: “All my life” and “every day” (plus two linking phrases, “then” and “I guess”). Her eyebrows are upturned and her mouth frowns, as thought bubbles show her running as a child. At this level, this seems to be a page that shows a woman dreaming of running, as arrows point to the broken heart, thick middle, and prosthetic limb that she “endures” every day. In actuality, though, the narrative that takes us around her body is disclosing the fact that a “weak heart” is the most debilitating physical condition she has, causing her to have to lay on the couch after climbing to her apartment to catch her breath. The thought bubbles are a memory of short breath playing as a kid, and the arrow to her stomach actually refers to a stitch in her side. The arrow to her leg relates the way in which she’d sit and listen to her heart during stationary activities that were easy with a prosthetic. On the level of the page view, visual resonance and diagram-syntax

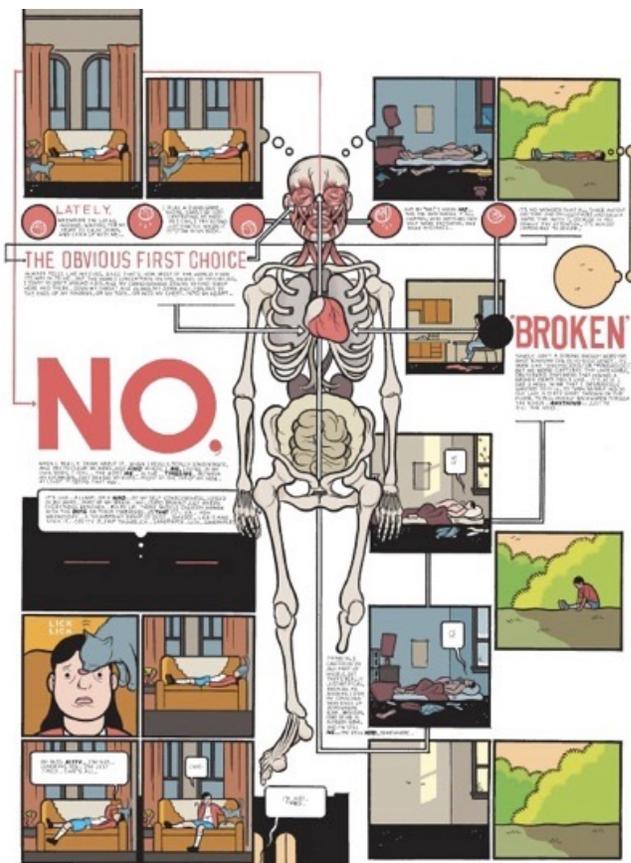


Figure 13. Interior anatomy page layout (overview). From the clothbound book piece. Chris Ware, *Building Stories*, 2012.

that seems to suggest brokenness looms large; the smaller panels circling the central image, however, “talk back” to this first-glance meaning.

In a similar kind of tension-creation, the last page in the series shows her skeleton and organs; the words “broken” and “NO” are the most prominent, as all arrows seem to lead to her heart (fig. 13). The surrounding panels show her laying on the couch in her apartment with a cat, laying in bed next to her first boyfriend, masturbating, and laying on the grass as a child. These

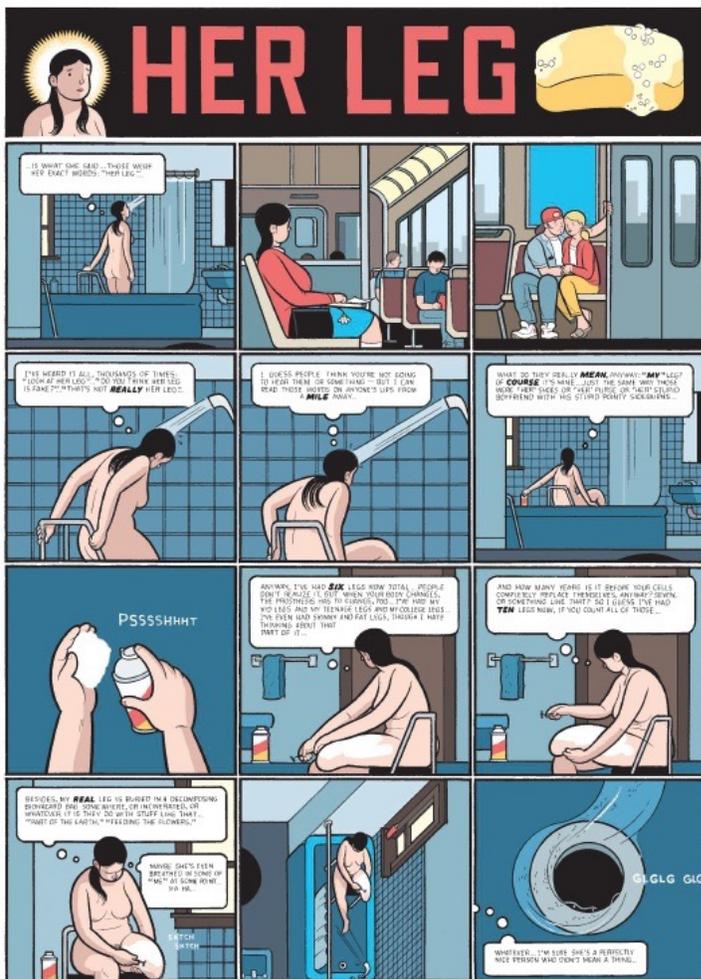
impressions combine the vaguely negative tenor of “broken” and “no” with quiet scenes of being alone. The issue here might be a broken heart—but even at this zoomed out level, “NO” is both a grim observation and a statement of defiance at such an interpretation of her body and her life. But again, the actual narrative in text accompanying the surrounding panels is about her attempts to find where she truly is in her body, and her answer is that “NO,” it’s not in her heart, but between her eyes at the bridge of her nose. Ware’s narrative invites the snap judgments of ableist disability projects that connect disability to debility and brokenness, and then by manipulating the levels of reading enabled by the comics page, peels those meanings away as not what the story is, in fact, about.

Seeing Violations: Visual Aspects of Disability and Race

In two scenes, *Building Stories* continues its representational project of orchestrating representations of putatively extraordinary bodies as ordinary by representing perceptual practices of seeing-as disability and seeing-as race. In these scenes, race and disability are rendered at moments when contesting ways of seeing about one another in the ordinary. In one scene, the protagonist remembers a moment where she witnesses others experiencing her body as aesthetically shocking, a “dawning of an aspect” where her body becomes legible as disabled all at once. In another, the protagonist’s husband experiences a police sketch of a black man as aesthetically shocking insofar as it represents racist seeing-as. These moments of seeing-as participate in a network of moments such that 1) visual experience is foregrounded as mutable even as ableist and racist seeing are made manifest, and 2) the influence of these ableist and racist seeings-as on the meaning generated by the whole is shifted and de-formed.

In the cloth-bound *Acme Novelty 18* volume, a page with large title lettering, “Her Leg,” recounts a memory of a stranger noticing the protagonist’s prosthetic, one that comes back to the protagonist as she showers and then sits down to shave her legs. The affective shock of

remembering being “seen-as” is visually communicated by the title, large red lettering against a black background, accompanied by an image of the protagonist with a pointy-bordered aura. The title also functions as the first line of the narrative: the first panel shows the protagonist thinking, in the shower, “[‘Her leg’]...is what she said...those were her exact words, ‘her leg’...,” while the second panel rewinds to the protagonist riding on a CTA car, sitting back, her purse next to her, a flower and notebook on her lap (fig. 14). This panel renders the protagonist as she was before being seen-as disabled; like the riders in the rest of the train behind her, she is drawn without eyes, and our angle shows one leg due to the perspective. Peeking out of her skirt, knee-socked, it’s her right leg,



which is not her short leg. The third panel shifts back into the aspect-dawning expressed by the exclamation “her leg” that opened the scene, as a couple is shown from the protagonist’s point of view, the man looking directly at us with raised eyebrows and a downturned mouth, the woman’s eyes squeezed together under similarly raised eyebrows. The couple’s heads are pressed against one another, and the woman clutches the man’s arm in a defensive posture. The only explanation for their affectively intense reaction is the uncanniness of the protagonist’s transformation from

Figure 14. “Her Leg,” a narrative in which the protagonist shaves her legs. From the clothbound book piece. Chris Ware, *Building Stories*, 2012.

anonymous woman, sitting quietly, to disabled woman—an aspect-dawning, the intrusion of “disabled” onto the scene. This moment of being seen-as something different from one moment to the next is coming back in memory to the protagonist with a similar affective impact.

As she turns off the shower and sits down to shave her legs, the protagonist works through and argues against the couple’s perceptual experience by insisting on its non-sense. The shock at a prosthetic, ostensibly coming from a sense that it doesn’t belong to a stable, “proper”¹⁹⁷ body, is non-sense, she muses, because it is proper to her in the same way that shoes or “stupid pointy sideburns” are proper to the couple. As she insists on her prosthetic’s belonging to her body, she elaborates that because it must belong to her body, she’s “had **six** legs now total,” because “when your body changes, the prosthesis has to change too...” She ups the tally of legs to ten in the next scene, further arguing against the couple’s singling her particular leg out as strange, as she accounts for the fact that “your cells completely replace themselves” every seven years. This insistence that her short leg is nothing to be weirded out about (in particular, anyway) is layered on a visual narrative in which the protagonist engages in the routine activity of shaving her short leg: she squirts shaving cream in her hand, smears the foam on her leg, grips it with one hand, and hunches over the work of moving her razor. As she executes this mundane task, her analysis mixes prosthetic and organic legs in its count, and it points to the body’s impropriety broadly speaking, apart from disability and prosthetic legs. This thought gets radicalized as she thinks about her amputated leg as part of the indeterminate “dance of atoms”¹⁹⁸: “Besides, my **real** leg is buried in a decomposing biohazard bag somewhere, or incinerated[...] ‘part of the earth,’ ‘feeding the flowers,’/Maybe she’s

¹⁹⁷ Also in the sense of “proper to”/“belonging to,” not just “correct”/“as it should be.”

¹⁹⁸ “The unique power of literature finds its source in that zone of indeterminacy where former individuations are undone, where the eternal dance of atoms composes new figures and intensities every moment.” See Jacques Rancière, “Deleuze, Bartleby, and the Literary Formula,” in *The Flesh of Words: The Politics of Writing* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 149.

even breathed in some of ‘me’ at some point...ha ha...” These thought-bubble musings coincide with an end to the visual narrative of shaving that renders this common activity strange by virtue of a perceptual orientation to hairs as body-bits. The final scene, a close up of tiny hairs being carried away down the drain, points to bits of body cut off and discarded as a matter of routine, underlining again the question of what counts, in the actual-world concepts that shape perceptual experience, as “something to see.”¹⁹⁹ “Her Leg” lingers on a moment that approximately belongs to a scene narrated earlier, in “My Life”(fig. 15). Here, the protagonist has been at a bar and rides the train home to lie on her couch, ruminating about how “every day runs together...everything runs down the drain.” These words, along with almost-perfect visual resonances between the panels of the “Her Leg” couple and of the protagonist riding on the train in profile, establish that “Her Leg” is a remembered scene from the train ride in “My Life.” “Her Leg” transfers the scene to the daytime, remembers the woman’s clothes with different colors, and adds a notebook and flower to the protagonist’s lap. But what’s curious about the way “My Life” reshapes the meaning of the “her leg” comment, the ableist seeing-as, is that the same train ride can be narrated in a way that lets the



Figure 15. Inset from “My Life” as the protagonist observes a couple on a CTA train. From the clothbound book piece. Chris Ware, *Building Stories*, 2012.

¹⁹⁹ That is, this scene sutures a “nothing to see here folks” argument to a scene where everything represents the instability/impropriety of the body, even and especially events that would normally be done without a second thought.

woman's comment fall into the gutter; for all its affective shock, being seen-as disabled is an event among events.

Building Stories takes up the question of visual experiences where a particular interpretation of the body comes into view again with a scene in the Oak Park magazine piece (“Disconnect”) that represents racist seeing-as made palpable. A police drawing takes on the aspect of caricature, and is characterized as awful and racist, preposterous; as in “Her Leg,” this scene presents a seeing-as whose injustice is stunning to the person scrutinizing it—here, the protagonist’s husband, Phil. At the same time, the scene discomfitingly pushes back at the obviousness of what’s going on with



Figure 16. Cartooning as rooted in racial caricature. Chris Ware, *Acme Novelty Library Final Report to Shareholders and Rainy Day Saturday Afternoon Fun Book*, 2005.

these images. Phil’s disavowal of the image’s representational sense is left unconfirmed by the protagonist at the same time that it is called into question by other details of the scene, making the images teeter on the edge of racial and racist drawing. This meditation

on racialized images’ disconnect/connection with actual human beings—or to echo W.J.T. Mitchell, the ways they mediate recognition and misrecognition²⁰⁰—is undertaken in the context of a history highlighted by Ware in his *Acme Novelty Report*, whose history of art proclaims that “[cartooning’s] strongest roots are **not** in the Academic tradition, but in an arcane system of 19th century

²⁰⁰ Mitchell writes that images act as “‘go-betweens’ in social transactions, as a repertoire of screen images or templates that structure our encounters with other human beings . . . Stereotypes, caricatures, classificatory figures, search images, mappings of the visible body, of the social spaces in which it appears would constitute the fundamental elaborations of visual culture on which the domain of the image—and of the Other—is constructed. As go-betweens or ‘subaltern’ entities, these images are the filters through which we recognize and of course misrecognize other people.” “Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture,” in *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 351.

physiognomy and **racial caricature!**” An accompanying image shows a waving Mickey Mouse next to the same image with ears removed, now readily recognizable as a minstrel show face (fig. 16).²⁰¹

In an important Oak Park magazine scene, the protagonist’s husband, Phil, emails her a set of photographs to look at, saying “Oh my god you have to see this...” After three panels of waiting for the images to go through the internet, we encounter a set of bust portraits, one a police sketch rendered in pencil, and one that is ostensibly a comics rendering of a mug-shot photograph, as it’s drawn with the same smooth black outlines and unmodulated blocks of color as Phil and the protagonist (fig. 17). Phil says, “See? They caught that robber guy...but look at the original police

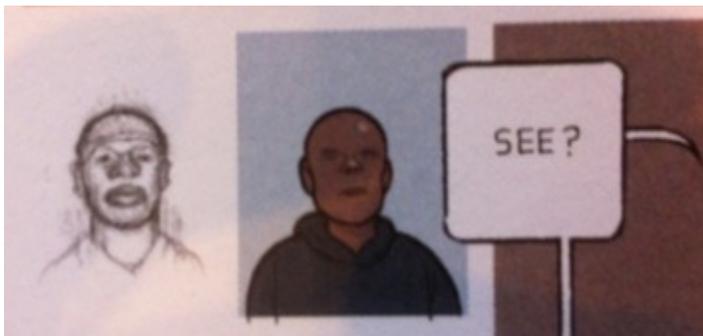


Figure 17. Panels depicting a police sketch and mug-shot photograph of a black man. From the Oak Park magazine piece. Chris Ware, *Building Stories*, 2012.

sketch.../there’s absolutely no resemblance at all.” As Phil is sending this email, the protagonist receives the images at the same time as an email from her art school boyfriend, who abandoned her after she had an abortion. She exclaims, “holy **shit**,”

which Phil takes to be a reaction to the police sketch image; he responds “I know...isn’t it nuts?/It’s like a racist caricature or something...” This misunderstanding creates a scene where Phil thinks he’s connecting with the protagonist over a racist image, and that she is confirming that the racist image is an aberration, a disconnect (worthy of a “holy **shit**”). But she’s unplugged from the issue and the preposterousness of the racist seeing-as goes unconfirmed, actually. I’m not sure what your point is w that observation. In this other reality of the unfolding scene, the images and the event of

²⁰¹ Chris Ware, *Acme Novelty Library Final Report to Shareholders and Rainy Day Saturday Afternoon Fun Book* (New York: Pantheon, 2005), n.p.

racist seeing-as stay in the space of distracted conversation as the protagonist's attention is turned elsewhere—the “holy **shit**” isn't a confirmation of the image's distortion at all, but the first line in a thought that continues two panels later, “I just got an email from my ex-boyfriend.” In this way, despite Phil's speech bubble exhortations that this is something to see, the images' relative smallness in the overall page composition, and their appearance in a narrative rushing to other ends embed them into the ordinary as episodes, “occasions that frame experience while not changing much of anything.”²⁰²

If we examine the images themselves, they are similar in size, but indeed rendered very differently: the sketch is rendered in a gray textured line that looks like a pencil drawing, paradoxically more detailed than the comics rendering of the photograph.²⁰³ In terms of physiognomy, the sketch includes lines on the forehead that suggest a protruding brow-bone where the photo shows a smooth forehead; the nose in the sketch is larger and broader; the lips in the sketch are extremely full, but thin and set in a slight, hard frown in the photograph-picture; and the sketch gives the man a thicker neck. The exaggerations of the man's anatomy are grotesque enough to point to themselves, and in that they speak a visual language established by 19th century physical anthropology, one that systematically locates race in features of the body, they resemble the caricature-images typical of 19th century mass-produced “Sambo Art” and, indeed, comics.²⁰⁴ The scene also points to the representational power of the image in ways that are discomfiting because of

²⁰² Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 101.

²⁰³ As Scott McCloud has famously argued in *Understanding Comics*, increased detail in realistic drawing objectifies the thing being rendered, emphasizing their “otherness” from the reader.

²⁰⁴ For a survey of comics representations of blackness, see Fredrik Stromberg, *Black Images in the Comics: A Visual History* (Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics, 2012). There have been many accounts of 19th century sciences of racial embodiment (as physiognomy and “blood”-based genetics); for one nicely focused on race as visually written on the body, see Elizabeth Abel, *Signs of the Times: The Visual Politics of Jim Crow* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

the sketch's legibility, by virtue of its juxtaposition with a drawn photograph, as an image that engages in stereotype, amplifying certain features historically used to bolster claims for essentialized racial difference.²⁰⁵

Even as Phil is calling this image out as racist, an aberration, it's also the case that the drawing is rendered in a recognizable visual language of racial particularity, one that still *means*.²⁰⁶ Phil insists that "there's absolutely no resemblance at all," but the strength of the assertion makes it false, since it resembles a human face as opposed to, say, a chair, and it's one that renders visual signs of

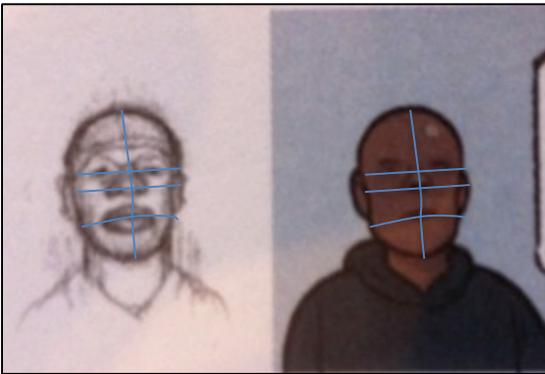


Figure 18. Comparison of feature placement in the police sketch and drawn photograph. From the Oak Park magazine piece. Chris Ware, *Building Stories*, 2012.

blackness that still have conventional power. Even more specifically, there is a resemblance since the relative position of the features on the face, if not their shape and size, are similar (fig. 18). More tellingly, the police sketch ostensibly "worked" as an identifying image: the robber was caught. This scene asks us to *see* "seeing-as," and by making racial drawing palpable as discreditable, it creates an image that condemns racist seeings-as, prompting us to

perceive with thinner description by virtue of contrast: a man with a bald head and brown skin, his head slightly cocked and his mouth set in a hard line, who (we are told) has robbed a store. The police sketch instantiates the concept-object of race as an effect of racism; made manifest, it enables

²⁰⁵ Tim Caron, "Black and White and Read All Over: Representing Race in Mat Johnson and Warren Pleece's *Incognegro: A Graphic Mystery*," in *Comics and the U.S. South*, eds. Brannon Costello and Qiana J. Whitted (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2012), 142.

²⁰⁶ That is, it's *not* the "circle, black with two hotdogs in the middle for a mouth" that Ollie Harrington decries as typical of early 20th century renderings of African Americans, but rather it's a visual language that is still compelling in its ordinary use. Charles R. Johnson, introduction to *Black Images in the Comics: A Visual History*, by Fredrik Stromberg (Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics, 2012), 8.

a perceptual experience where a racial drawing, the mug shot *photo*, becomes perceptible as representing a singularity rather than a kind.

The protagonist's bathtub reflection manages to shape a perceptual experience for readers that undoes the sense of the train couple's reaction, with its accompanying images of plodding short-leg shaving and tiny leg-bits going down the drain. But Phil's incredulous "see?" in response to the distortions of this police sketch is ultimately unconfirmed and the matter is left unsettled as the scene moves on to the actual "holy shit" event. While the making-perceptible of racist seeing makes it possible to read a racial image as referring to a particular body, the man's arrest confirms the power of racial seeing-as, its ability to make sense that matters. Together these scenes attach the aesthetic world constructed by *Building Stories*' pieces to the actual world by evoking familiar, recognizable modes of perceiving disability and race; but these conceptual objects emerge in the flux of a represented ordinary characterized by distraction, variable perceptual practices, visual juxtapositions, and resonances with other scenes, constellations that form and deform conventional seeings-as for race and disability.

Belongings, Calibrated and Recalibrated

In a scene originally published as "Actual Size" in *Kramer's Ergot 7*, we learn of a friendship between the protagonist and an African American girl (identified as "that new girl") who moves to her school just after her amputation surgery. The "Actual Size" story of the new girl is one of the protagonist's belonging as it fluctuates according to others' visual experience of bodies.²⁰⁷ The entire

²⁰⁷ As opposed to the formal shifts I explicate in the next portion of this section, these shifting visual experiences are attributed to characters in the story (the new girl, the "pretty girls," classmates). It's worth noting that narrated as they are from the protagonist's point of view, these visual experiences can only be accessed by inference from these characters' behavior. The panels' rendering of the protagonist's body itself are decidedly unshocking—she uses calipers, but her legs are unremarkable, covered by her long pink pants.

story—of healing, going back to school, becoming friends, and having a disastrous sleepover—represents distinctions between kinds and forms of belonging as volatile and changing. The narrator’s childhood post-amputation is narrated in two movements, the first about coming home from the hospital, and the second about going back to school.

Coming home is narrated in the textual register in terms of a thicket of trees surrounding the house, as the protagonist tells us: “I still remember what a welcome sight it [the yard] was the night I came home from the hospital after the surgery.../...how safe and warm I felt, nestled back inside...” The accompanying images have a slightly different focus: while one of the panels shows an interior shot cropped around a window so that the trees’ branches are visible outside, the panels depict the protagonist’s mom hugging and comforting her as her father kneels next to her changing her bandages. Post-surgery is about healing literal wounds, pain, getting to know how to ambulate given her different embodiment, and interdependence: “those were oddly happy times, really...I guess I felt so close to mom and dad then...they were there for me every step of the way...” Going back to school is, the narration tells us, “the hardest part,” because it’s more mercurial; this is the space where the protagonist first experiences her body as something that polarizes desire and rejection.

Going back to school, the narration explains, “felt weird, unfamiliar.” Though the weirdness is attributed to the school environment in the textual narrative, the first image shows the protagonist walking across the classroom using calipers, the teacher guiding her. The students of the class all turn toward her and gaze intently at a “weird, unfamiliar” body, their mouths slightly downturned lines. Weird and unfamiliar again shifts referents from the protagonist’s body back to the school environment as the narrative tells us “At first, everyone was really nice to me, almost overly so...the pretty girls who’d never even given me the time of day before were suddenly competing with each other to be my ‘friend’...” In the image, two girls stand on either side of the protagonist, each

tugging on one of her arms, saying, “**I**m carrying her books!” and “No, **I** am!”(fig.15). The protagonist’s narration hints, with quotation marks around “friend,” at what the visual narrative confirms: the niceness isn’t about acceptance or welcome. Though the protagonist is looking at one of the girls, the girls are looking at each other; the signature bright pink of the protagonist’s outfits in this story set her apart from the greens of the girls’ clothes and the people and spaces of the school in general.

“That new girl” comes onto the scene as the protagonist’s enfreakment into a novelty object has subsided and she no longer holds the interest of her peers. As when the protagonist returned to school after her surgery, the new girl’s arrival is marked by a presentation-scene where she stands in the front of the room as the teacher introduces her. The students, including the protagonist, look in her direction, though we can’t see their faces; the viewpoint of the panel is positioned such that we are seated in the third row of desks, looking at the backs of other students’ heads toward the teacher and the new girl. The new girl holds a book and lunchbox and averts her gaze, looking slightly down with a frown. Her expression relays her discomfort with being the object of the classroom’s gaze, though race is never avowed as having anything to do with her own “weirdness and unfamiliarity.” The new girl wears blue colors that, like the protagonist’s bright pink outfits, contrasts with the green of the school space²⁰⁸; her facial features, rendered in schematized cartoon form, are nearly identical to the protagonist’s, and her pigtails, a string of black dots, are very similar to the black dots of the protagonist’s single braid. As line drawings, the girls are almost indistinguishable: clothing color, skin color, pigtails vs. braid, and the protagonist’s calipers differentiate them. This visually-signalled belonging is accounted for in terms of an analogous non-belonging to playground social

²⁰⁸ This blue clothing also distinguishes the new girl here, during her friendship with the protagonist, from her status in the bullying scene the protagonist remembers in the Oak Park newspaper installment.

circles: after the protagonist explains that “the dust had settled around me [...] just the way things go, I guess,” large blue letters reading “WHICH IS WHY” lead to a scene that says that the protagonist and the new girl “became fast friends”(fig. 19). This “WHICH IS WHY” emphasizes a logical relation of analogy, where the normativities of playground social dynamics make the disabled

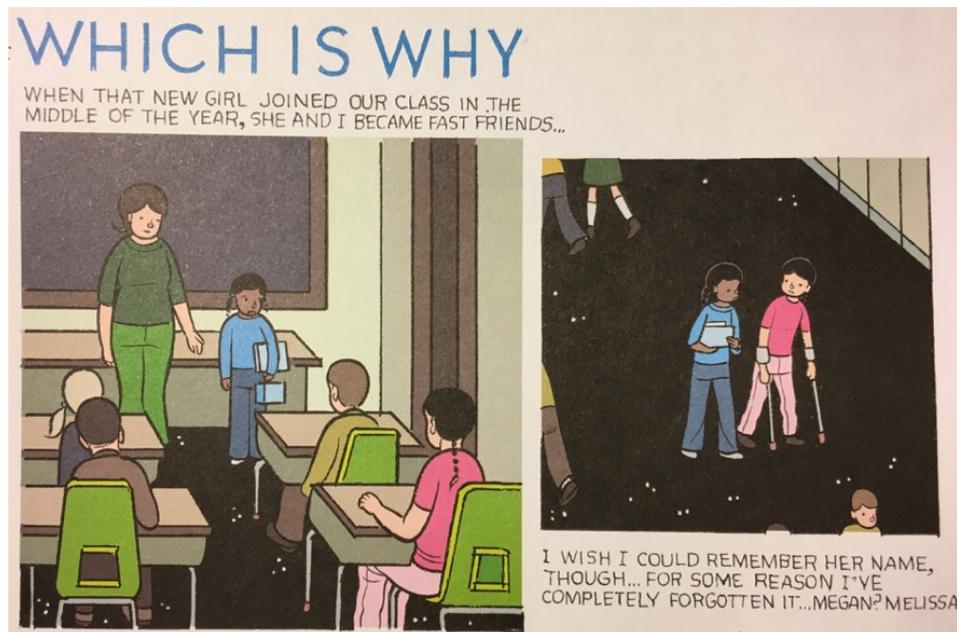


Figure 19. Panels depicting the new girl's arrival. From the “Actual Size” broadsheet. Chris Ware, *Building Stories*, 2012.

protagonist and the black new girl similar in kind. But the elaboration of their belonging to one another avows the protagonist's status as disabled while leaving the reason for the new girl's social precarity unstated: “the amputation seemed to only agitate the already capricious currents of childhood friendship...one day, I'd feel welcome, and the next I'd be cast ashore...I suppose the new girl and I found some common ground in our mutual uncertainty...” Newness-unfamiliarity is, in the textual register, strictly what constitutes the new girl's belonging with the protagonist. Racialized non-belonging is, here, is communicated in a visual, silent, color-cued language; it goes without saying.

In the sleepover with the new girl, this common unfamiliarity splays in a pivotal shift as the new girl's apparently involuntary reaction to seeing the protagonist's leg teaches the protagonist that her body can be visually experienced as so unfamiliar that it becomes grotesque and frightening. In the textual register, this painful part of the protagonist's memory remembers the new girl's upset and need to leave as caused by a tree-branch knocking on the window. It's only by closely observing that "she totally freaked" "just after we'd gone to bed," and by noticing that the protagonist has removed her prosthetic and changed into pajamas that end at the knee, that we realize that the protagonist is trying to make sense of the possibility that when the new girl "thinks there's a monster," she's reacting to the protagonist's own body. In the scene, the new girl is facing an



Figure 20. Flashback panels depicting the aftermath of a sleepover. From the "Actual Size" broadsheet. Chris Ware, *Building Stories*, 2012.

interior wall, hunched over and saying "Momma!" The narration of the incident understands it as an unfortunate and incidental reaction to a storm and a tree branch, with a nonchalant "...so much for our sleepover." But the subsequent reflection keeps trying to explain the incident in terms of the new girl having "pretty bad emotional problems" and says "So I didn't let it bother me..." indicating that a scary tree branch underexplains what has happened.

The new girl's reaction is a catalyst for a series of veiled outbursts about "the unfairness of life"; here, of dehumanizing seeings-as-for disability that mediated the new girl's experience of the protagonist's body. Round flashback panels appear alongside a large image of the protagonist's house after her father "used [the incident] as justification to finally cut down most of the trees..."(fig. 20). The protagonist is wearing different clothes in

each flashback, but they are all rendered in blue, the new girl's signature color, and their content is stuck to the sleepover and its aftermath: in one, the protagonist is told by her mother that it was just a tree branch, as she responds with an indication that she understands the rejection: "no no no no no no." In the other, she shouts to her parents, "Don't tell me I'm pretty! I know I'm not pretty!"

Building Stories never dramatizes the actual boating accident that leads to her amputation, the "origin story" of her disabled embodiment. In "Actual Size," we're witnessing the starting point of a web of moments throughout the protagonist's life narrative where the protagonist's self-image is deeply deformed and her actions shaped by doubts about her physical attractiveness. The narrative says that "the bad part of the incident" was the removal of the thicket, rather than the end of the friendship or being seen-as monstrous. The narrative's emphasis on the violent cutting of this removal resonates with the amputation the protagonist has recently undergone ("hacking"), and the change is framed as a crisis of certainty that's tied to the protagonist's body by simile: "until right then [the thicket] had seemed as certain to me as the small constellation of birthmarks on the inside of my wrist." This is a simile about skin coloration; however, it is most attached to the meaning the thicket held for the protagonist—enclosure, protection. These scenes, taken together, prompt us to read not the amputation but the seeing-it-as-monstrous—and the way that visual experience disintegrated the protagonist's belonging to the new girl—as the impetus for a newly uncertain body, and as a flaying of the protagonist's sense of security. The narrative likens the hurt of disability to the aspect-dawning shock of seeing her house without its thicket, reduced to its form: "I came home to see our house suddenly so exposed, naked...it looked like what it was, too, a mean little box on a mound." This series of scenes builds the pain of this memory in terms of the powerful visual normativities that so easily dissolve the protagonist's belonging to the new girl, a belonging that was itself only ever provisionally forged by the playground dynamics that sutured her stale novelty to the new girl's familiar racial unfamiliarity.



Figure 21. Panel depicting the protagonist jogging past another jogger, a black woman. From the Oak Park newspaper. Chris Ware, *Building Stories*, 2012.

herself, “I’m good now, right?” A black woman jogs by, huffing a “hi,” which the protagonist returns, and so it seems, the protagonist continues with her absorption in thought: she frets about feeding the cat and remembers an uncharitable rant about her friend Stephanie (fig. 21). But then her thoughts flit to her childhood, when she “just stood there” as “the new girl” is bullied. “I’ve tried to be good,” the memory starts out, and her memory of her inaction leads her to conclude, “I’m not good.” Though the new girl isn’t identified as African American, the children are “throwing leaves and dirt and calling her names,” and her head and raised arm are colored dark brown (fig. 22). From the scene

Building Stories also materializes categories as “events, actions, and encounters between bodies” that multiply and shift across the relations between elements of a scene.²⁰⁹ In the Oak Park newspaper, the protagonist is on a jog through Oak Park, and the panels track a roving movement of her surroundings, memory, and reflection. On one two-page spread, she is immersed in memories of and regret about having gotten an abortion, asking



Figure 22. Memories of standing by when the new girl is harassed. From the Oak Park newspaper piece. Chris Ware, *Building Stories*, 2012.

²⁰⁹ Puar, “I Would Rather,” 58.

in the “Actual Size” broadsheet, we know that when the new girl came to the protagonist’s school shortly after the protagonist’s amputation surgery, she was in a socially precarious position because of her status as nonwhite, an outsider. The connection between these scenes on the Oak Park newspaper page suggest that even with diffuse attention, the woman jogging by registers as an African American woman, prompting the memory of the protagonist’s anti-racist failings.²¹⁰ At the same time that the jogger is a prompt for a memory of the new girl, and at the same time that they are drawn using the same color brown for their skin, their only connection is the protagonist’s perception of a certain aspect, being black. For both figures, the comic’s visual rendering of blackness operates almost exclusively in terms skin color—the new girl isn’t very visible, and while the jogger’s body is much more svelte, the lines of her head and face are almost identical to those of the protagonist.

In another set of relationships between elements of visual rendering, however, the jogger wears a white sports bra and blue shorts, making her “match” the protagonist’s white t-shirt and blue jogging pants. Likewise, in her memory, the protagonist wears the same blues and grays as the image of “everyone” bullying the new girl—the jogger, protagonist, and “everyone” wears these colors and are “of a kind.” The new girl, on the other hand, is represented in a bright red shirt. On the next page, the protagonist is dressed in the same bright red as she remembers having her friend Cary over to a housesitting gig, where he doesn’t take her up on her subtle seductive gestures. Here the protagonist-in-red flops back over into an “of a kind” relationship with the bullied new girl:

²¹⁰ Peter Sattler rather presciently characterized the shorter installment of “Building Stories” found in *Acme Novelty Library 18* as using the hybridity of word and picture “to ‘encode’ what I will call *experiential memory*—the feeling of remembering, the phenomenology of memory itself.” “Past Imperfect,” 210. In its expanded form, including in this Oak Park newspaper scene, *Building Stories* “encodes” the associative flitting of rumination and memory as it gravitates to that which attaches to what is going by in real time and that which has particular affective density.

socially vulnerable and outcast. In his reading of Spike Lee's *Bamboozled*, W.J.T. Mitchell notes that in traditional aesthetics, color is "the 'secondary characteristic—evanescent, superficial, and subjective—in relation to the 'primary quality' of line, which connotes the real, tangible features of an object, and which is the central feature of the stereotype and caricature as linear figures." He writes that the film "shows us how color becomes line, becomes a tangible substance and a boundary."²¹¹ I'm arguing here that the rendering of the jogger, in terms of the delineation of her head and face, belongs almost exactly to the protagonist; in terms of the delineation of her body, she's more fit; here, color becomes line insofar as *Building Stories* uses the same skin color schema for its white characters and very similar shades of brown for its black characters, dividing them into kinds. But color is also used as line—something that becomes a "tangible substance and a boundary"—when it aesthetically mediates belongings that recalibrate the more familiar racialized "kinds."²¹²

Abutting this color calibration and recalibration of "kind" categorizations is an encounter the protagonist has with an old art-school friend, Cary, who is black.²¹³ Cary's emergence on the scene is one of going from being an extra, a man walking in the background across the street from the protagonist's jog, to being a character treated in successive enlarging portraits, rendered in a drawing style that diverges from most of *Building Stories* in its greater detail. Six large panels depict the protagonist hearing his call, seeing him wave from across the street, looking in confusion,

²¹¹ W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want: The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 308.

²¹² Without undoing those skin-color-based belongings; these various calibrations are copresent in the same image, not unlike the duck-rabbit image game.

²¹³ Cary's belonging to the protagonist's group of friends from art school gets similarly calibrated and recalibrated in a scene in the Little Golden Book: at a Mexican restaurant, one of them says, "You remember when we were, like, the only white people who came in here?" Cary responds with a "hey/speak for yourselves," a break in the we, one that's brushed aside with a "ha ha."

watching him look both ways as he crosses the street, the protagonist with a vermillion background as she realizes who it is, and then a close up of Cary's face and shoulders as he greets her (fig. 23).



Figure 23. Panels depicting the protagonist as she bumps into an old friend. From the Oak Park newspaper piece. Chris Ware, *Building Stories*, 2012.

The solid, lime green backgrounds behind the close-ups of the protagonist in these panels correspond to the disorientation and surprise of being hailed by someone she doesn't yet recognize as her old friend; in striking contrast to the greens, browns, blues and whites of the rest of the narrative, the panel where the protagonist looks directly at the reader has a solid vermillion background. This represents an affective surge, but it's not the surge of a racial dawning-of-aspect, but of recognition and being jarred from the anonymity of her run into the life-accounting of meeting someone after a span of years. She thinks: "wait...good god, is that...**Cary?** It is! Oh lord, it is!" These color-blocked panels, along with the close-up panel of Cary, also exist in tension to the rest of the panels on the two-page spread by virtue of their more detailed rendering. The close-up panel of Cary echoes the vermillion shock-portrait of the protagonist: he is cropped at the chest, looking at the reader directly.

The shift into more realistic rendering replaces the usual thin lines of the protagonist's eyebrows with threads of small black hairs; her eyes, usually black dots, are almond shaped with whites, black irises, and eyelids; her nose is not a small circle or an upside-down question mark, but a rounded tip with two nostril sills. Her lips are fleshy and colored the same pink as her nose tip and ears. Cary, whose panel includes the protagonist's thought bubble, "he looks **terrible!**" is rendered with a similar level of detail. A thin band of lighter brown along the top of his bald head indicates the sheen of his skin; two thin lines cross his forehead, and another curved line indicates a soft chin. Full maroon lips part in a slight smile to show two spaced front teeth; his nose is almost identical in shape to the protagonist's, with a tip and two distinct nostril sills, and on it perches some stylish glasses. His green pullover distinguishes him from the "of a kind" shared by the African-American jogger and the protagonist, as well as from the bright red of the new girl's clothes.

As the Oak Park newspaper scene concludes, Cary responds to the fact that the protagonist is out jogging with an empty stroller in order to lean on it for stability by saying "Oh right...of course..." This is a blasé if perhaps slightly embarrassed acknowledgment that the Oak Park motherhood called-up by the stroller is true for the protagonist but not actually the disability that the stroller signifies, and a calling to consciousness of something he already knew. In this moment, the constellation of racial figures dissipates as the protagonist's disability appears, however anti-climactically. Across this jogging scene, then, the aesthetically-mediated belonging of three characters that are represented-as African-American by virtue of their skin color is dispersed by other textures of the rendering—color-signaled belonging, affective elicitation (distracted greeting, deep guilt, "catching up" dread). We barely can make the new girl out in the image—she's mostly obscured by the bodies that surround and taunt her. The jogger is rendered in the eyeless, schematized form given to extras elsewhere in the narrative—including the protagonist when she's riding the train in "Her Leg." Cary is placed in a belonging with the protagonist that's materialized

by a distinct visual language of close-ups and greater detail.²¹⁴ These represented ways of looking resist the reductions of seeing through the perceptual scrim of actual-world categories (disabled/fit, white/black), visually recalibrating each character to the others in varying ways: as fellow jogger, as marked apart by vulnerability, and as perceptually intensified.

Conclusion

Johanna Drucker has written that the way Ware organizes graphic space “actually contributes content to the story, is part of the telling intimately bound to the told.”²¹⁵ *Building Stories* populates its panels with repeated materializations of the protagonist’s disabled body, as it’s drawn over and over again, panel after panel. And even as the protagonist’s body is contextualized in some moments by disability projects that understand her embodiment as radical otherness, because they are set into a general flux of moments in the ordinary of the novel, these understandings get crowded by others, whether contradictory or additive, and the effect is that the constellation of meaning as a whole shifts and resettles. Racial representation is similarly put into careful composition with other scenes, often emerging as an event but getting swept away by the overall trajectory of a narrative; blackness conditions the protagonist’s own belonging to places in contradictory ways, making Englewood unthinkable, but making Oak Park thinkable; and much to the same effect as the protagonist’s repeated materialization across panels, the many African American “extras” in grocery stores or on the streets function as denotations of blackness loosened from *representation-as* black as they are represented-as bystanders, scenery. *Building Stories*’ narratives foreground the ways that an aesthetic world built by form can craft a variable, shifting set of relations between narrative moments and

²¹⁴ This detail is still iconicized; it doesn’t have the effect of alienation and objectification that Scott McCloud attributes to photo-realistic drawing in *Understanding Comics*.

²¹⁵ Johanna Drucker, “Graphic Devices: Narration and Navigation,” *Narrative* 16, no. 2 (May 2008): 129.

visual renderings, producing the body-as-event as belonging to the ordinary, and producing that belonging itself as variable and slippery.

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