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"Trying hard to keep her from feeling outdoors": race, ability, and eugenics in early Morrison

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“TRYING HARD TO KEEP HER FROM FEELING OUTDOORS”:
RACE, ABILITY, AND EUGENICS IN EARLY MORRISON

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By

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Trigger Warning: This thesis addresses topics that may be triggering to some readers. These topics include eugenics, slavery, sexual violence, abuse, and murder which are motivated by race- and ability-centered issues. Some of these topics are discussed in explicit detail.

Introduction

“There is a difference between being put *out* and being put *outdoors*. If you are put out, you go somewhere else; if you are outdoors, there is no place to go.” – Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*

The first three novels of Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), and *Song of Solomon* (1977), are replete with black characters with dis/abilities¹. At times these dis/abilities are central to the characters’ sense of self. At other times dis/ability is only implied but still remains crucial to the overall narrative. These dynamics elicit questions about race, ability, and gender. The intersection of these identities calls for analysis that takes into account the historical tradition of both blackness and ability in American literature. This is necessary because, while Morrison constructs strong, black women with physical impairments, these women are routinely exiled from their societies. In addition, Morrison depicts black characters with mental illness as the mythic Other or even as worthy of elimination. For Morrison, blackness is celebrated, but dis/ability is often characterized as the trait her characters must either abandon or face social and physical consequences.

When examining race in literature, scholars have a tendency to leave ability out of their research and to leave it to the scholars in Disability Studies instead. This pattern of scholarship is irresponsible in texts that directly confront the construction of both race and dis/ability, such as

¹ The term “dis/ability” is used to “1: counter the emphasis on having a whole person be represented by what he or she cannot do, rather than what he or she can, and 2: disrupt notions of the fixity and permanency of the concept of disability, seeking rather to analyze the entire context in which a person function” (Annamma et al. 1).

the work of Toni Morrison, because it ignores the joint history of race and ability. Subini A. Annamma, David J. Connor, and Beth A. Ferri shed light on this joint history: “Through the ‘science’ of phrenology, craniology, and eugenics among others, it was ‘proven’ that people of color had less capacity for intelligence than Whites and laws, policies, and programs were created that discouraged reproduction of particular types of people, particularly the poor and people of color, along with racial mixing” (22). Pseudosciences were invented in order to control Othered bodies. Control was established through claims that blackness was inherently “less” intelligent, and through that dis/ability undeserving of citizenship and basic human rights. Jay Timothy Dolmage defines “eugenics as the ‘science’ of controlling who lives, who pro-creates, who thrives, and who dies, based on flawed ideas about our genetic makeup” (11). Throughout Morrison’s work some of her characters have this power over the life, death, and procreation of others which has not been connected to eugenics thus far. These dynamics should be read in terms of the early twentieth century eugenics movement in the United States.

The joint history of race and dis/ability in America provides context for reading Morrison’s work. Moya Bailey and Izetta Autumn Mobley note the eugenic claims specifically around chattel slavery. White people subscribed to beliefs that validated slavery, such as the belief that black people were “suited only for work, and not for freedom” and “Thomas Jefferson’s assertion that Blackness inherently barred one from full cognitive citizenship” (24). Another pseudoscientific belief was “the idea of drapetomania—making the Black desire for freedom a psychologically aberrant mental illness” (25). Pro-slavery whites used these arguments as moral justifications for dehumanizing black bodies through ownership. These justifications, as noted by David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, have resulted in a desire for black people to leave dis/ability in the past (2). After the emancipation of slaves in America,

eugenicist logic still controlled black and dis/abled bodies through specific laws. Dennis Tyler Jr. writes that the unsightly-beggar ordinances “aimed to segregate the disabled from public view, while Jim Crow laws aimed to segregate black people from white people” (186). Morrison wrestles with this history. Some of her black characters with dis/abilities succumb to these racist and ableist beliefs while other characters use dis/ability to define the boundaries of blackness.

Morrison’s interest in race and ability must be considered within the time period she writes about. Dolmage writes that in the early 1900s “eugenics characterized and drove North American national health and immigration policy. In addition to the ‘negative’ eugenic programs of sterilization, lynching, and so on, carried out over decades across the country, immigration was ideal for ‘positive’ eugenics, literally offering opportunities to control and edit the gene pool, using immigration stations as an elaborate sieve” (11). Controlling not only the movement of people, but also who could live and have children was central to American policy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This history is the time period Morrison focuses on in her writing. Her early novels take place in the first part of the twentieth century. The eugenicist history behind the treatment of black people and people with dis/abilities is essential to reading Morrison because her first three novels center around a historical period when race and ability were painfully linked in public discourse and policy.

Despite these important historical considerations, Morrison typically presents dis/ability as a means to an end in her early work. Nevertheless, she has received a considerable amount of praise for the way that she constructs blackness and physical dis/ability. The problem is that dis/ability covers much more than physical ability. As Rosemarie Garland Thomson explains:

Disability is an overarching and in some ways artificial category that encompasses congenital and acquired physical differences, mental illness and retardation, chronic and

acute illnesses, fatal and progressive diseases, temporary and permanent injuries, and a wide range of bodily characteristics considered disfiguring, such as scars, birthmarks, unusual proportions, or obesity. (13)

The broadness of this category demands that dis/ability takes into account more than physical difference. While scholarship on Morrison has addressed physical disability, the scholarship has not focused on how Morrison represents black characters who experience mental illness, such as depression and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). These characters are consistently present across Morrison's novels. Part of this project is examining how Morrison uses mental illness as rationale for physical violence unless the character conforms to the trope of a hyper-able² black man. The other part of this project is analyzing the ultimate downfall of all of Morrison's physically dis/abled black characters in light of America's eugenic history.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Pauline Breedlove is Morrison's first strong, black woman with a physical impairment. Pauline is seen by some to be an outlier compared to the other women with physical impairments that Morrison later writes. Thomson specifically states that "Pauline Breedlove ... bears the label of bodily deviance and the markings of history, just like her successors. But Pauline does not display the authority, dignity, or quasi-supernatural powers of figures like Eva, Thérèse, or Pilate" (122). However, Pauline is still a powerful figure in the text. She runs her household, provides for her family, and has a commanding presence. Like other matriarchs that follow her, Pauline is the eccentric glue that holds her family together.

Despite her matriarchal role, Pauline is not an empowered woman. Instead, Pauline has internalized both the racism and ableism of her society. No one has to tell Pauline that her floppy foot sets her apart in a negative way; Pauline decides that on her own. She does not feel the

² Hyperability is part of Dolmage's definition of ableism and privileges bodies that are not only free of impairments but in no way need accommodation or assistance of any kind (7, 70, 157). I hyphenate the term throughout.

warmth of her familial bonds because of her perception of both blackness and dis/ability. She remains painfully isolated, only happy when in service to whiteness. This isolation is reminiscent of the physical and social isolationist practices that have historically surrounded eugenicist movements against both blackness and dis/ability in America. In addition, the manner in which Pauline finds solace in labor also reflects her internalized racism by following the logic that black bodies are meant for work.

However, Pauline is not the only Breedlove with a dis/ability. Pecola Breedlove, after abuse and sexual trauma, dissociates. Her dissociation is presented as a pitiful magic wherein Pecola receives the blue eyes she so desperately prays for each night. Dissociation, especially when juxtaposed with abuse, suggests that Pecola has developed PTSD. This mental illness and Pecola's blackness isolate her from her community and family. There is no strength in Pecola's character. She is crushed under the weight of internalized racism, which in the end is embodied as PTSD. The trauma in *The Bluest Eye* results in Pecola's mental illness, but also suggests the generational trauma of black people in America due to chattel slavery. The freedom Pecola so desperately seeks is only attained through the "magic" of dissociation. Abuse of black bodies with mental illness is thus perpetuated in a community that has whole-heartedly absorbed racist and ableist standards of beauty.

In *Sula*, Morrison shapes black masculinity through her black dis/abled men. Shadrack, a soldier in World War I, witnesses a horrific death and ends up in the hospital with what is assumedly PTSD. He establishes a National Suicide Day which structures the town and ends up predicting a mass death in the town at the end of the book. In this way, Shadrack shares some magical qualities as was seen with Pecola. However, Shadrack's magic is based in the myths people tell about him. These myths give him power in the community even though he is isolated.

People are afraid of him. Along with his mythic power, Shadrack's physical strength allows him to exist throughout the novel. His physical hyper-ability is partially what awards him social capital in a novel that is not accommodating of black men with mental illnesses. For example, Plum Peace, another veteran from the war, cannot survive on his own. He too returns from the war changed. Plum shows signs of depression and becomes addicted to drugs. His mother, Eva Peace, decides that Plum's inability to function on his own means that she can end his life. These two situations call into question what it means to be a man, in particular a black man, and how dis/ability figures into that construction. The questions are only exacerbated by the presence of Tar Baby, a mixed man with depression. Tar Baby remains in the background of the novel, but his racial identity is unclear and he is rejected by both black and white characters. His silence and eventual death follow the eugenicist logic of forbidding racial mixing.

Eva Peace is Morrison's second black matriarch with a physical impairment. As is seen in her authority over Plum, she has the ability to control life and death in the novel. Eva calls the shots for her family. She provides, even at the expense of herself and her family. Eva is not a warm mother-figure. Similar to Pauline, her children question if she loves them. However, even more striking is that, even with all the power attributed to Eva, her deified nature is stripped from her as soon as Eva encounters the medical field. In the hospital, Eva loses her goddess qualities and loses her connection with the community who awarded her that status. Her age allows Sula to put Eva into a nursing home partway through the novel so Eva is pushed to the edges where she began so central to the text. This forced relocation of a black dis/abled body recalls the American asylum during the early to mid-twentieth century as these asylums were overpopulated with ethnic minorities.

In *Song of Solomon*, dis/ability becomes less apparent. Morrison's next matriarch possesses a physical difference but not one that many would classify as a dis/ability: she was born without a navel. According to Morrison, this difference allows Pilate to "literally invent herself" (qtd in Thomson 120). Pilate Dead has been read by scholars in terms of dis/ability because of her physical difference; however, Pilate also is characterized by a sense of magic. Multiple characters view Pilate as "crazy" because of her eccentric lifestyle. As eccentric as she is, Pilate is another powerful matriarch. While the other matriarchs have limited or strained connections with their family, Pilate is surrounded by her daughter, granddaughter, and nephew throughout the book. The community knows and respects Pilate, mostly out of the fear of her witchcraft because of her missing navel. Pilate's trajectory differs the most from Morrison's other matriarchs and where she ends up does as well. Pilate is killed suddenly in an accident. This narrative choice begs the question: Was her power too threatening? Did she fly too high? Getting caught in the eugenicist crossfire of Guitar, one of the Seven Days, is portrayed as an accident but still contributes to the overall arc for characters with dis/abilities in this novel: they die. In a novel where black culture and ancestry is powerfully celebrated, these characters can only die in the interest of protecting blackness.

In contrast, Pilate's nephew, Milkman Dead, has a physical impairment which partially composes his sense of self. Milkman hides his impairment. In fact, a lot is hidden about Milkman in the novel. He goes on a journey to discover who he is and where his people are from. Milkman is also imbued with a certain amount of magic. His life is bookended by the myth of flight. There is power and pride in the way that Milkman goes about his life. There is fear and violence. In the background of Milkman's entire journey is retributive justice for the killings of black people by white people. The novel intersects with many historical events that hold

importance for black people, such as the murder of Emmett Till, and for people with dis/abilities, such as President Roosevelt using his wheelchair. For Milkman, these events are all intensely personal and help him to construct what it means to be a young black man with a dis/ability in America. Ultimately, Milkman must discover how to accept his heritage in order to fly, and therein to be free of his limp. Morrison ties Milkman's reconnection with his ancestors to the healing of his physical impairment. This, along with her previous work, suggests that black men can only participate fully in black masculinity if they are free of dis/abilities.

Toni Morrison's first three novels each have characters that must navigate both their blackness and their dis/ability. In some cases, these intersections produce strength. In other cases, these intersections highlight weakness. However, in all of these representations the intersection of blackness and dis/ability is intensely intertwined with the eugenicist history of America. Race and ability, in the context of the early twentieth century American eugenics movement, has not been fully explored by scholars of Morrison's writing. However, my analysis of her first three novels will provide a starting place for future interventions of Morrison's work after her famous *Song of Solomon*.

“her bad foot was an asset”: Internalized Ableism and Embodied Racism in *The Bluest Eye*

Pauline Breedlove is Morrison’s first black woman with a physical impairment. Her impairment, a broken foot, is as essential to Pauline’s identity as her blackness. In her quest for white beauty, Pauline seeks comfort in white religion, white media, and white family. Working for a white family validates Pauline but reinforces the slave-owner logic of believing black bodies are meant to do work. She turns to work because both her blackness and her dis/ability prevent her from participating in community and cultural traditions. Although her husband, Cholly, does sate her need to be desired for a while, Cholly’s sexual desire eventually is expressed elsewhere. Pauline’s dis/ability is fetishized, producing Cholly’s sexual desire, but her husband expresses this desire through raping his daughter who has recently reached the age where sexual reproduction is possible. This transference of desire onto able-bodied Pecola Breedlove suggests that Pauline is no longer needed for sexual reproduction. After she is raped, Pecola magically receives blue eyes, but it is clear she is the only one who sees them. She dissociates, a trait common in people with PTSD, and through her abuse the entire community experiences catharsis in the wake of historical racism against their people. Through Pauline and Pecola’s embodied experiences with racism and ableism in *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison showcases the destructive nature of white culture on black bodies.

While Morrison has a clear focus on race in both her creative and scholarly work, in her 1993 foreword to *The Bluest Eye* she prominently uses dis/ability rhetoric. She continuously frames her project in terms of dis/ability. The feeling of being disliked or hated is “the stress (minor or disabling) that is part of life as a human” (Morrison, *Bluest* ix). While not discussing the social construction of dis/ability, Morrison recognizes that social interactions can be “disabling.” She writes that she wanted to investigate:

the far more tragic and disabling consequences of accepting rejection as legitimate, as self-evident. [Morrison] knew that some victims of powerful self-loathing turn out to be dangerous, violent, reproducing the enemy who has humiliated them over and over.

Others surrender their identity; melt into a structure that delivers the strong persona they lack. Most others, however, grow beyond it. But there are some who collapse, silently, anonymously, with no voice to express or acknowledge it. They are invisible. (Morrison, *Bluest* ix-x)

Morrison labels the emotional experience of submitting to social isolation as “disabling.” Again, she frames a social experience in terms of a dis/ability that most “grow beyond.” However, here Morrison gives several examples of what “disabling” looks like: violence, submission, and erasure. These three reactions to dis/ability, as a socially conferred and internalized identity, align with three of the main characters: Cholly, Pauline, and Pecola.

Morrison challenges, intentionally or not, the ableism inherent in Western beauty standards. While growing up, Morrison discovered that “Beauty was not simply something to behold; it was something one could *do*” (*Bluest* xi, emphasis in original). She categorizes beauty not only as a visual sign, but as an ability. Therefore, there is a specific intersection of race and ability that define beauty. It is clear for Morrison that whiteness is part of this harmful, racialized definition, but her construction of ability is less overt and at times deceptive. However, in addition to the racism and ableism that Morrison identifies in beauty standards, she uses dis/ability rhetorically to show the psychological impairment of a community. The community realizes they cannot “do” beauty in the way white culture demands. Beauty as an ability plagues the characters in *The Bluest Eye*.

Ugliness and beauty are pervasive throughout the novel, and either prevent or award social status. The Breedlove family as a whole is self-destructive, and each one of them fundamentally believes they deserve the discrimination they receive. In fact, “No one could have convinced them that they were not relentlessly and aggressively ugly” (Morrison, *Bluest* 38). The Breedloves are “convinced” of their ugliness because society values a specific type of body, a white body, and the family has internalized this construction of beauty. When discussing why the Breedloves are “ugly,” the narrator “realized that it came from conviction, their conviction. It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question” (*Bluest* 39). The “all-knowing master” that rules over who is ugly and who is beautiful is privileged society, and therefore white society. The racial boundary is present even through the invocation of a “master” which implies the Breedloves are slaves to whiteness and believe in whiteness “without question.” The Breedloves accept their “ugliness,” although each family member responds to it differently, and in doing so also accept their social isolation. Much critical attention has focused on internalized racism and beauty standards in the novel because of how the family responds to being “ugly.”

However, Pauline Breedlove has an additional reason specific to her for why she believes she is rejected socially by those around her: her impaired foot. If beauty is indeed “something one could *do*,” acknowledging Pauline’s impairment is crucial. She cannot “do” non-impairment just as she cannot “do” whiteness. Therefore, the intersectional experiences of internalized racism and ableism are distinct, but equally important to why Pauline believes she is “ugly.” The narrator introduces Pauline’s impairment by stating that “The easiest thing to do would be to build a case out of her foot. That is what she herself did” (Morrison, *Bluest* 110). There is a deceptive element in what is claimed here. The narrator appears to be reluctant to use Pauline’s

impairment as a framework for her character since that would be “the easiest thing to do.”

Although references to her foot follow Pauline throughout the novel, this pattern is blamed on Pauline’s conception of her foot instead of addressed as a narrative choice. However, this novel is Morrison’s dream and therefore Pauline’s internalized ableism is essential to Morrison’s interrogation of beauty. Pauline hates her impairment and passes this along to her children by teaching “them fear: fear of being clumsy, fear of being like their father, fear of not being loved by God, fear of madness like Cholly’s mother” (*Bluest* 128). Because of her internalized ableism, Pauline teaches her children to fear dis/ability. The last of these fears is “madness” which resonates with Pecola’s eventual PTSD. However, the first of these fears is “being clumsy” which resonates with Pauline’s own physical impairment.

In teaching her children to fear these things, Pauline constructs dis/ability in the novel as socially unacceptable. Pauline’s fear of being an outcast motivates her because, as with her race, Pauline experiences real, concrete consequences because of her dis/ability. Her impairment shapes her worldview:

Slight as it was, this deformity explained for her many things that would have been otherwise incomprehensible: why she alone of all the children had no nickname; why there were no funny jokes and anecdotes about funny things she had done; ... why nobody ever teased her; why she never felt at home anywhere, or that she belonged anyplace. Her general feeling of separateness and unworthiness she blamed on her foot.

(*Bluest* 110-111)

To Pauline, her impairment separates her from many of the social connections she desires. She needs to blame all of these social issues on her foot because she cannot conceive of another

difference between her and the other kids. Pauline can see her physical impairment and therefore can attribute her social woes to it, which is the beginning of her internalized ableism.

Even not being teased, which some may view as a benefit of her impairment, actually leaves her out of an important aspect of black culture. Darryl A. Smith analyzes the African American tradition of trading insults with one another, called “the dozens,” which dates back to chattel slavery in the United States (292). The dozens created a community among those who were dis/abled through the institution of chattel slavery. However, the dozens builds community not by avoiding dis/ability and impairment, but by exaggerating it. Smith argues “The dozens is a paradoxical practice that ameliorates disabling social forces through the skillful, stylized refiguring of these very forces” (303). Making fun of one another’s differences through exaggeration is bonding because it highlights the differences that would make them unappealing in the eyes of slave-owners. It is a humor that shows the ridiculous nature of eugenic ideology through subverting the commodification of black bodies.

Not having the dozens as a way to subvert eugenic beliefs about dis/ability contributes to Pauline’s internalized ableism. Based on how the dozens typically works, Pauline should have been made fun of for her impairment. Instead, Pauline feels loss because no one makes “funny jokes” about her or “teases” her (Morrison, *Bluest* 111). She wraps up all of the feelings of “separateness” in her physical impairment. Pauline’s separateness is not simply social. Not allowing Pauline to participate in the dozens follows a trend in Morrison’s work that Cynthia Dubin Edelberg notes in her article. Repeatedly in Morrison’s work, the narrator “does not permit the characters to succeed through channels generally thought to be useful and reliable” (219). Pauline is denied a useful part of black culture and must learn different ways to cope with her internalized racism and ableism. Instead of finding comfort in community relationships,

Pauline seeks out white culture to fulfill her emotional needs. Pauline seeks out the prosthetics of white faith, white labor, and white beauty in order to cope with her internalized racism and ableism, but she fails deny her embodied experience.

Pauline Breedlove attempts to prostheticize her physical impairment through Christian mythology of healing dis/abled bodies, but ends up with an empty martyrdom instead of physical or spiritual healing. When Pauline was fifteen, she would dream in church of a man that would appear “and before whose glance her foot straightened and her eyes dropped. The someone had no face, no form, no voice, no odor. He was a simple Presence, an all-embracing tenderness with strength and a promise of rest” (Morrison, *Bluest* 113). She dreams of a “Presence” who lacks physical qualities, such as a face and form, and it is implied that she is seeking God to heal her. Pauline’s healing is juxtaposed with a bodiless healer, a figure that erases embodied experience. The fantasized erasure of her dis/ability connects her bodily difference to morality and spiritual healing. Her faith has a prosthetic function because, as Mitchell and Snyder write, “If disability falls too far from an acceptable norm, a prosthetic intervention seeks to accomplish an erasure of difference all together; yet, failing that, as is always the case with prosthesis, the minimal goal is to return one to an acceptable degree of difference” (6-7). Pauline fantasizes that her faith will erase her physical impairment. However, this fantastic prosthesis does not occur. It remains Pauline’s fantasy but the connection she draws between morality and her embodied state allows Pauline to project her ableism onto others’ spiritual failures, seen most notably with Cholly.

When her faith cannot act as a prosthetic, Pauline turns to martyrdom and divine judgement. In her spiritual fantasy, Pauline draws a clear connection between her faith and her impairment. This connection implies the lack of spiritual goodness is connected to dis/ability. It implies that her “crooked, archless foot that flopped when she walked” (Morrison, *Bluest* 110)

somehow makes Pauline less worthy, and more in need of rescue. She briefly believes she is rescued when she meets Cholly for the first time, but later settles into her role as Cholly's divine judge. She continues to connect her spiritual mission with her physical appearance when the narrator claims that Pauline "handled" her ugliness "as an actor does a prop: for the articulation of character, for support of a role she frequently imagined was hers—martyrdom" (39). Her self-defined ugliness refers to both her race and her impairment. Her internalized discrimination against her own body fuel her judgmental nature in spiritual matters as well. She is a woman on a mission to judge because judgement is all she knows. Pauline's radical faith is reflected even in her name which could be, as Allen Alexander suggests, a reference to the biblical figure of Paul (295). Alexander's theory is fitting because of the martyrdom that both Paul and Pauline take upon themselves to carry out the will of Christ. The two martyrs conceive of their missions differently: Paul to bring Christ to the Gentiles, and Pauline to judge them. As seen in her marriage, Pauline finds her spiritual mission much closer to home as she is "an upright, and Christian woman, burdened with a no-count man, whom God wanted her to punish" (Morrison, *Bluest* 42). Instead of finding her own redemption and healing, Pauline punishes Cholly up to the point of physical violence because she cannot accept less than perfection in either his character nor her own body. The implications here are that Pauline also feels "burdened" by her impairment, and thus constructs her own dis/ability.

While religion allows Pauline to redirect her internalized racism and ableism, her work allows her to find prosthetic fulfillment through accepting the role of a slave and, in so doing, subverting ableist tropes. In the Fishers' house, Pauline "became what is known as an ideal servant, for such a role filled practically all her needs" (Morrison, *Bluest* 127). Pauline takes on work in a white family's house, reproducing power dynamics going back to slavery. However,

Pauline is happy in this role. Even the sounds Pauline's foot makes in the Fishers' house reflects her heightened sense of belonging: "Here her foot flopped around on deep pile carpets, and there was no uneven sound" (*Bluest* 127). Consider this in contrast with the sound her foot makes in her own home: "Her one good foot made hard, bony sounds; the twisted one whispered on the linoleum" (*Bluest* 39). In the Fishers' home, Pauline's impairment audibly disappears. Her foot might as well be healed when she is in the Fishers' home. Pauline chases a sense of healing throughout the novel and this need is prosthetically met through her work. Consequently, Pauline creates another fantasy and happily loses herself in her work. One of the unique tensions of being black and dis/abled is that, "Historically, Black people have been valued for their utility, particularly in a former slave economy. For this reason, the stakes for identifying as disabled, or acknowledging a compromised relationship to labor and the ability to generate capital, is often not a viable option for most Black people" (Bailey and Mobley 25). Pauline is valued for her labor in the Fishers' household. When her impairment is temporarily prostheticized on the Fishers' carpet, it reinforces the idea that a laboring black body is not compatible with dis/ability.

The prosthetic function of Pauline's labor is only achieved through interest convergence. Pauline's impairment is prostheticized through her work. Despite how her work encourages internalizing racist and ableist beliefs, Pauline delights because "Power, praise, and luxury were hers in this household. They even gave her what she had never had—a nickname—Polly" (Morrison, *Bluest* 128). On the surface, this seems to be beneficial for Pauline. She gets access to "power, praise, and luxury," that would otherwise be out of reach, through her position with the Fishers. However, her privileges are only granted because they serve a wealthy, white, hyper-able family. This phenomenon echoes Annamma et al's acknowledgement of "Whiteness and Ability as Property and that gains for people labeled with dis/abilities have largely been made as

the result of interest convergence of White, middle-class citizens” (Annamma et al. 19). Any benefit that Pauline experiences with the Fishers is because their interests overlap. In this case, both Pauline and the Fishers are interested in perpetuating racist dynamics. For Pauline, she receives the benefit of subverting ableist notions about dis/ability unqualifying her for labor. For the Fishers, they receive the benefit of Pauline’s labor. In addition to faith and labor, Pauline fetishizes white beauty and sexuality as a way to counteract her race and impairment.

Pauline fetishizes a white, hyper-able body. During her pregnancies, Pauline would go to the movies and watch romantic movies where “the flawed become whole, the blind sighted, and the lame and halt threw away their crutches” (Morrison, *Bluest* 122). She no longer waits for miraculous healing, but instead Pauline puts her faith in beauty and romance. These two concepts become Pauline’s idols and she attempts to conform to white, hyper-able beauty standards in two poignant ways. One way Pauline attempts to conform to unattainable beauty standards happens just after moving to Ohio. She notices that “The women in town wore high-heeled shoes, and when Pauline tried to wear them, they aggravated her shuffle into a pronounced limp” (Morrison, *Bluest* 117-118). The high heels are another attempted prosthesis for Pauline. Pauline attempts to conform to the fashion of the other women around her, but instead of accentuating her legs the high-heels accentuate her impairment. Not only do the shoes highlight her impairment, but they also are seemingly painful because of the word choice used here; The shoes aggravate her foot and cause her to “limp.” These are not qualities that correlate with comfort, and the implied physical pain of the shoes is parallel to the ableist notion of needing to wear the shoes. Mitchell and Snyder observe that, especially for dis/abled people, “The body is up against an abstraction with which it cannot compete because the norm is an idealized quantitative and qualitative measure that is divorced from (rather than derived from) the observation of bodies, which are

inherently variable” (7). Pauline’s notion of what bodies should be able to do is incompatible with the reality that all bodies have different abilities. She is unable to wear high heels without being in physical pain. However, Pauline clings to this ableist prosthesis in order to feel beautiful. Although Pauline tries using material goods to deny her dis/ability, she “did not really care for clothes and makeup. She merely wanted other women to cast favorable glances her way” (Morrison, *Bluest* 118). Pauline is not expecting much at this point. She is only seeking “favorable glances” from the other women and is willing to literally contort her foot into a high heel in order to participate in ableist beauty standards.

Pauline’s second attempt to conform to unattainable beauty standards is when she tries to look like actress Jean Harlow but is reminded of her body’s physical condition. Pauline only admits she cannot attain the elusive white beauty standard when she loses a tooth: “There I was, five months pregnant, trying to look like Jean Harlow, and a front tooth gone. Everything went then. Look like I just didn’t care no more after that. I let my hair go back, plaited it up, and settled down to just being ugly” (*Bluest* 123). The moment Pauline loses her tooth is pivotal for her self-image. She has come a long way from the excitement of new love with Cholly. Because of the importance of this moment in the novel, it has received much critical attention. However, the critical attention on the loss of Pauline’s tooth has ableist undertones. James Robert Saunders goes so far as to compare the loss of her tooth to Captain Ahab losing his leg to the white whale in *Moby Dick* and to “amputee victims in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars” (193). Beyond the tasteless comparison to veterans with impairments, Saunders also ignores that Pauline’s internalized ableism towards her foot is what makes losing a tooth so pivotal for her. Pauline would not have responded to her tooth the same way if she had not grown up hating her physical

impairment. For Pauline, her tooth is a crucial reminder of the physical condition she already despises: black and dis/abled.

Pauline briefly forgets her internalized ableism when her impairment is fetishized. The only time Pauline seems to distance herself from ableist and racist beauty standards is when she first meets Cholly. Pauline is leaning on a fence when she hears Cholly whistling behind her. She feels something touching her foot and turns to find “The whistler was bending down tickling her broken foot and kissing her leg” (Morrison, *Bluest* 115). Her foot is key to their shared memory of meeting for the first time. Cholly gives her foot playful attention by tickling it. Instead of being seen as ugly, as Pauline eventually internalizes, “he made it seem like something special and endearing. For the first time Pauline felt that her bad foot was an asset” (*Bluest* 116). No longer a trait that she hates, her impairment is now “an asset.” Her foot is constructed as sexually appealing which allows Pauline to find romance with Cholly. However, the sex appeal is inextricably linked to her impairment. The foot, and particularly the impaired foot, is fetishized. In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison writes that fetishism “is especially useful in evoking erotic fears or desires and establishing fixed and major difference where difference does not exist or is minimal” (68). While Morrison is writing explicitly about the fetishism of blackness, her argument on the function of fetishism is useful for the fetishism of dis/ability. Fetishizing Pauline’s impairment creates “fixed and major difference where difference does not exist or is minimal.” Her impairment is described as “slight” (*Bluest* 110), but making her foot a sexualized Other allows an “erotic fear” to be produced in the novel. This fear is embodied through Cholly raping his daughter, Pecola.

The horror of Pecola’s rape is connected to her mother’s physical impairment, and the connection suggests that the sexualizing of dis/ability is also horrific. Before he notices the

similarity between the motion Pecola's foot makes and the motion Pauline's foot makes when he first meets her, Cholly feels such intense "hatred" for Pecola that he was about to "vomit" (Morrison, *Bluest* 162). But when he sees the "timid, tucked-in look of the scratching toe" that reminds him of Pauline's foot, his anger vanishes and, with "his eyes on the foot of his daughter," Pecola becomes a sexual object (*Bluest* 162). The connection Cholly makes between Pauline and Pecola's physical bodies foregrounds his sexual violence towards Pecola. Subjugating Pecola to his own sexual desire reinforces racist logic used to justify violence against black women. Historically, "Stereotypes about Black women's hypersexual natures were used to justify sexual violence against Black women" (Bailey and Mobley 25). Cholly's initial sexual attraction to Pauline is transferred onto Pecola's body and, in his mind, justifies raping his daughter. However, blackness is not hypersexualized in this novel. The hypersexuality of Pauline's impairment, not her blackness, is what Cholly focuses on. Her impairment is fetishized and justifies his violence against his daughter.

In addition to the hypersexualizing of the female, black, dis/abled body, Pecola's rape also confronts the historical hypersexualizing of black girls' bodies. Early in the novel, Pecola has her first menstrual cycle (Morrison, *Bluest* 27). She becomes, biologically, a woman. After helping her through the beginning of her first period, Claudia and Frieda "were full of awe and respect for Pecola. Lying next to a real person who was really ministratin' was somehow sacred. She was different from [them] now—grown-up-like" (*Bluest* 32). Menstruation is viewed as a rite of passage in this scene. It signals Pecola's admission into womanhood. While this scene is touching, Pecola's ability to sexually reproduce is significant to Cholly raping her because Pecola ends up pregnant with her father's child through his sexual abuse. Bailey and Mobley write that "Black girl bodies are surveilled and judged 'too developed,' making them responsible

for any sexual violence they experience” (25). Like black women, black girls have also been historically hypersexualized. The belief that these young girls’ bodies are ““too developed”” depends on racist tropes of the hyper-able black body. Black males are considered incredibly strong, but black females of any age are considered incredibly sexual.

For Pecola, this creates a dynamic where her hypersexualized body replaces Pauline’s dis/abled body in sexual reproduction. While raping Pecola, Cholly observes that “The rigidity of her shocked body, the silence of her stunned throat, was better than Pauline’s easy laughter had been” (Morrison, *Bluest* 162). He prefers Pecola’s resistance to his sexual assault over Pauline’s consent. Cholly decides to forcibly sexually reproduce with Pecola instead of with Pauline. This dynamic removes Pauline from sexual reproduction, which inherently suggests eugenics. Once another body that is capable of sexual reproduction becomes available to Cholly, Pauline primarily serves as the source of desire but not who his desire is directed towards. Dis/ability has historically been positioned as a reason to exclude people from sexual reproduction. Annamma et al. “acknowledge that dis/ability ... trigger[s] stereotypic associations with weaknesses, including fears of individuals seen as unhealthy, unable to adequately compete in work and war, with their reproductive potential questioned, feared or even forcibly managed” (24). Pauline’s “reproductive potential” is not directly questioned or feared. However, Cholly forcibly manages the reproduction of both Pauline and Pecola by preferring to rape his able-bodied daughter instead of having consensual sex with his wife, Pauline. This grotesque enactment of eugenics is at least partially Cholly’s redirection of his own sexual trauma onto Pecola when he rapes her.

Cholly’s sexuality is tied with the white oppression of black bodies during his first sexual experience. While having sex with Darlene, two white hunters interrupt Cholly and force him to

continue to have sex with her while they watch. Cholly developed a hatred for Darlene during this event, but “Never did he once consider directing his hatred toward the hunters. Such an emotion would have destroyed him. They were big, white, armed men. He was small, black, helpless” (Morrison, *Bluest* 150). Cholly’s response is to hate the only person in the situation who was more helpless than himself: Darlene. He would rather appropriate the white hunters’ aggression and power than hate them because, in Cholly’s mind, that would be an admission of his own weakness. The violence white people enacted upon black bodies, both men and women, is part of the cultural trauma of African Americans. Crownshaw writes that “trauma travels culturally. It makes sense that, if historical trauma cannot be known in its own right, then it resonates in another event” (169). Cholly cannot process his own traumatic event in a healthy manner. Therefore, his trauma, and the cultural trauma of white bodies perpetrating violence on black bodies, resonates through Cholly raping both Darlene and Pecola. Cholly, oppressed by white hunters, becomes the oppressor. Cholly’s sexual violence against a black woman’s body reproduces the sexual violence slave-owners forced upon their slaves.

After all of the abuse Pecola experiences, she dissociates and physically embodies the community’s collective trauma. Her internalized racism, along with the abuse she receives from all sides in the novel, crushes her self-worth and breaks Pecola psychologically. At the end of the novel, Pecola dissociates. She has a conversation with herself and tries to deny that she was raped: “*And Cholly could make anybody do anything. He could not. He made you, didn’t he? Shut up! I was only teasing. Shut up! O.K O.K. He just tried, see? He didn’t do anything. You hear me?*” (Morrison, *Bluest* 199). Going back and forth, Pecola tries to process what happened to her. She reveals that Cholly raped her, not once, but twice and that her mother did not believe her (*Bluest* 200). It is only through her dissociative conversation within herself that she can

reveal her own trauma. Crownshaw defines trauma “as that which defies witnessing, cognition, conscious recall and representation – generating the belated or deferred and disrupting experience of the event not felt at the time of witnessing” (167). Pecola’s internal conversation happens much later than the initial sexual attack. One part of her consciousness repeatedly reminds her, teases her, about the rapes. However, Pecola’s trauma is the community’s trauma. Claudia describes this dynamic through the metaphor of waste: “All of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed” (Morrison, *Bluest* 205). The community directs its internalized racism at Pecola throughout the novel. These harmful ideologies contribute to her eventual dissociation and magnify it because Pecola has no one to talk to but herself. Therefore, Pecola’s PTSD comes to represent the dissociation of the community from their own trauma.

However, despite the traumas she is attempting to process, Pecola finds comfort in her magically blue eyes. Throughout the entire novel, Pecola “prayed for blue eyes” (Morrison, *Bluest* 46). This prayer is an impossible dream for Pecola and is based on white normative beauty standards. She believes that blue eyes will make her beautiful and reverse the racialized abuse and self-hatred she experiences due to her dark skin. After she is pregnant with her father’s child, Pecola goes to Soaphead Church with her “little protruding pot of tummy” and asks to “see the world with blue eyes” (*Bluest* 173, 174). This is Pecola’s last effort to achieve the beauty she desperately seeks throughout the novel. Soaphead tricks her into believing she has blue eyes, but it is only through her dissociation that Pecola can truly turn her brown eyes blue. Because of this, her trauma becomes magical. Pecola believes she has blue eyes, but she still worries and asks herself: “But suppose my eyes aren’t blue enough?” (*Bluest* 203). Pecola fixates on her eyes and loses interest in other topics. She even loses her only friends because her “madness... simply bored [Frieda and Claudia] in the end” (*Bluest* 206). Pecola’s trauma is a psychological

impairment. However, it is portrayed as both magical and boring. Her life is considered less valuable after her dissociation because even her friends stop hanging out with her. Claudia and Frieda's decision reinforces ableist justifications for able-bodied people removing dis/abled people from their presence.

Pauline and Pecola Breedlove embody complex relationships between racism and ableism. For Pauline, she attempts to prostheticize her physical impairment through faith, work, and beauty. However, these attempts fail her and only heighten the racist and ableist conditions of her community and of her own self-image. Pauline feels beautiful when she first meets Cholly because he enjoys her physical impairment. Cholly fetishizes her black, dis/abled body and Pauline accepts that as a form of love. This fetishism becomes physically violent when Cholly uses Pauline's impairment as a fetish to generate desire that is enacted upon Pecola's young, black, able body. Removing Pauline from the act of sexual reproduction, reinforces ableist notions that dis/ability is inherently asexual. However, the incestuous horror of Cholly raping his daughter draws a direct link between sexualizing dis/ability and horrific sexual violence. Pecola dissociates in order to cope with these traumatic events and becomes the representative of her culture's trauma at the hands of white oppressors. This redirected trauma is most clearly seen in how Pecola's rape is reproduced from Cholly's own sexual trauma. Pecola's PTSD is read ultimately as a form of magic and as a reason for her abandonment. Frieda and Claudia, the only two characters that seemed to care for Pecola, justify why they stop spending time with Pecola by referring to her dis/ability. Ultimately this reinforces that black people with mental illnesses are not worthy of respect, a theme Morrison expands on in her second novel, *Sula* (1973).

“the boundaries and nature of his madness”: Mythic Ability and Social Capital in *Sula*

Trauma is prevalent throughout Morrison's body of work, particularly with regards to the effects of generational trauma on the individual. In *The Bluest Eye*, this is seen in how Cholly and Pecola experience racially-motivated abuse. While trauma in *The Bluest Eye* is connected to black history, Morrison uses trauma and mental illness in *Sula* to explore black masculinity. Morrison has several male characters who come back from World War I with noticeable changes in personality and mood, assumedly due to PTSD. However, Morrison's black masculinity can only co-exist with dis/ability under specific circumstances, such as when the man has sufficient social capital in his community. In *Sula*, social capital is built through mythologizing dis/ability within a community. One of the strongest example of this connection is seen through Eva Peace, Morrison's second matriarch with a physical impairment. Eva is a strong woman, but only within the cultural context of her community. Morrison's black characters with dis/abilities in *Sula* must develop social capital through the mythologizing of their dis/abilities. Without the power of myth, these characters are viewed as burdens that must be dealt with, either through death or through medical intervention.

Shadrack, as a black man, embodies racist hyper-ability and PTSD. Shadrack goes off to fight in WWI, has a nail in his shoe and, “Wincing at the pain in his foot, he turned ... and saw the face of a soldier near him fly off. Before he could register shock, ... the body of the headless soldier ran on, with energy and grace, ignoring altogether the drip and slide of brain tissue down its back” (Morrison, *Sula* 8). Similar to how the foot is used to signal dis/ability in *The Bluest Eye*, the foot is again used to signal Shadrack's impending PTSD. The physical pain of stepping on a nail quickly shifts into the emotional shock of witnessing a horrific death in the war. Morrison uses graphic language to describe the scene. It clearly leaves an impression on

Shadrack because he wakes up in the hospital out-of-touch with his own body, believing his hands are horrifically large (*Sula* 9). The dissociative belief of his body physically changing is similar to Pecola believing she has blue eyes. The trauma causes them both to feel altered in some way; however, Shadrack's body grows. While this terrifies Shadrack, it is a sign of his physical strength which is validated when the white, male nurse decides to confine him to a "straitjacket" after Shadrack knocks him over (*Sula* 9). Shadrack is characterized as both physically hyper-able and psychologically dis/abled. This dynamic has historical origins because, as Anna Mollow argues, "slave owners and their supporters contended that black people were so prone to physical and mental disabilities that they could not survive without the 'protection' of their white owners—while at the same time maintaining that people of African descent possessed such inordinate strength that they did not suffer from the abuses that their enslavers imposed upon them" (105). The mixture of physical strength and PTSD justifies, to the nurse, the restraint of Shadrack's body. The strength of his black, dis/abled body frightens the white hospital staff, but in his black community Shadrack's strength awards him social capital.

Within the community of Bottom, Shadrack gains social capital through being mythologized. Shadrack was "Blasted and permanently astonished by the events of 1917, he had returned to Medallion handsome but ravaged, and even the most fastidious people in the town sometimes caught themselves dreaming of what he must have been like a few years back before he went off to war" (Morrison, *Sula* 7). Shadrack is seen by the town to be "ravaged" by the war. He is a "handsome" shell of the man he used to be and is therefore the object of town objectification, but only in the form of dreams. Shadrack, as a man with dis/abilities, is fetishized and, like Pauline eventually becomes, only an object of fantasies. Unlike Pauline, part of the community's fetishizing of Shadrack includes mythologizing him. Shadrack becomes the

“crazy” old man, but the town recognizes that does “not mean that he didn’t have any sense or, even more important that he had no power” (*Sula* 15). It has already been established that Shadrack possesses physical power. The power the narrator refers to here is mythic. Mythic power is the ability to inspire fear or awe in others based on their belief in one’s ambiguous and outrageous abilities, typically spread through the invention of myths. For example, after seeing Sula toss, and therefore drown, Chicken Little in the river, Sula went to ask Shadrack if he saw the accident and he responds: ““Always”” (*Sula* 62). To Sula, this “answered a question she had not asked” (*Sula* 63). Sula grants Shadrack mythic power because of his dis/ability. The community has spread myths about Shadrack so once Sula interacts with him, she believes he is capable of reading her mind. Because of this belief, Shadrack is respected in the community, suggesting the development of social capital. The trope of psychological dis/ability granting power is noted by Mitchell and Snyder. They write that there has been a “long-standing association of madness with divine revelation and was also an example of the transgressive possibilities offered by an individual’s claim to various kinds of insanity” (40). People with psychological dis/abilities in literature have been granted mythic power, such as oracular abilities. This connection empowers the dis/abled body and mythologizes the embodied experience of, in Shadrack’s case, PTSD.

The town makes Shadrack integral to their everyday lives through mythologizing him and sharing in his trauma. Shadrack begins and ends the novel with the holiday he invented, National Suicide Day. Shadrack invents this holiday because “He knew the smell of death and was terrified of it, for he could not anticipate it” (Morrison, *Sula* 14). After witnessing the horrific death of another soldier in war, Shadrack cannot cope with the shock. He decides to implement National Suicide Day in order to control when death will occur around him. Crownshaw notes

that with trauma “it is not the event itself that returns in the dream, flashback, hallucination or other form of intrusive and repetitive behavior, but rather the failure to process and consciously represent the event. Repetition is the attempt to master what was missed first time round” (168). Shadrack does not relive the traumatic event; however, he settles on an annual ritual in order to master death’s unexpected nature. The ritual prevents Shadrack from coming to terms with his trauma, but it shapes the culture of Bottom. The entire town “stopped remarking on the holiday because they had absorbed it into their thoughts, into their language, into their lives” (Morrison, *Sula* 15). The town internalizes Shadrack’s PTSD rituals. They share in his trauma by mythologizing it. In this way, Shadrack belongs to the community and his holiday awards him social capital. He becomes essential to the town because “Trauma, then, is contagious: unlocatable in and uncontainable by witness and event, and forever departing” (Crownshaw 170). Shadrack’s PTSD is shared among the town and becomes “uncontainable” by him alone. The way Shadrack’s trauma shapes the town is partly why he survives throughout the novel. Other people who participate in National Suicide Day do not end up so lucky.

Shadrack’s PTSD leads to the deaths of many town members, but Shadrack’s social capital allows him to survive. Once “Shadrack had improved enough to feel lonely,” he has one last parade for National Suicide Day which results in many of the town members dying in a tunnel collapse (*Sula* 155-156). Shadrack’s mythic power increases once he improves and he is finally able to master death. National Suicide Day, once a harmless ritual, actually ends in an accidental mass suicide when the townspeople rush in and destroy the tunnel. His trauma is enacted upon the community because, as Crownshaw writes, “trauma has the potential to victimize all who are affected by the representation of trauma and the experience of representation, universalizing the category of victim and thereby confusing distinctions between

victim and perpetrator” (170). National Suicide Day is an expression of Shadrack’s trauma. By interacting with this representation, the community shares in Shadrack’s victimhood. Yet, Shadrack lives. Unlike Morrison’s other dis/abled men, Shadrack lives because he has enough social capital to remain part of the community’s mythos.

For black men who do not have social capital like Shadrack, their mental illnesses eliminate them from black masculinity. Like Shadrack, Plum also went off to fight in WWI (Morrison, *Sula* 45). He returns home “with just the shadow of his old dip-down walk. His hair had been neither cut nor combed in months, his clothes were pointless and he had no socks ... He got even thinner ... It was Hannah who found the bent spoon black from steady cooking” (*Sula* 45). Obviously experiencing depression and addiction upon returning from the war, these signs are suggestive of Plum’s PTSD. In contrast with Shadrack’s hyper-able physical body, Plum becomes “thinner” and no longer can take care of himself. In addition, Plum’s dis/ability is not mythologized like Shadrack’s and therefore does not provide him any social capital to lean on for help. Thomson writes that “The disabled body exposes the illusion of autonomy, self-government, and self-determination that underpins the fantasy of absolute able-bodiedness” (46). Plum represents another possible way for someone to cope with PTSD. Instead of dissociating like Pecola or creating a ritual like Shadrack, Plum turns to heroin to escape. It is clear that Plum needs help to manage his PTSD because he reveals “the illusion of autonomy” among the community. The illusion is broken, but the expectation of autonomy is violently upheld by his mother, Eva.

As a black, dis/abled man, Plum is expected to participate in stereotypically masculine roles, but when he cannot Plum is violently eliminated from the narrative. When Eva sees Plum’s behavior, she decides to burn him alive: “She rolled a bit of newspaper into a tight stick about six

inches long, lit it and threw it onto the bed where the kerosene-soaked Plum lay in snug delight” (Morrison, *Sula* 47). Instead of getting Plum help, Eva decides to take matters into her own hands and eliminate him. Even as she is killing him, Plum is infantilized with the phrase “snug delight.” He is portrayed as a baby instead of a man. The infantilizing logic continues when Hannah later confronts Eva about murdering Plum, and Eva responds: ““There wasn’t space for him in my womb. And he was crawlin’ back. Being helpless and thinking baby thoughts and dreaming baby dreams and messing up his pants again and smiling all the time”” (*Sula* 71). Comparing Plum to a baby as rationale for murdering him, plays into ableist narratives about what it means to be an adult man. Since Plum’s mental illness puts him at odds with the hyper-able trope of the strong, black man, Eva believes she is justified in killing him. Annamma et al. analyze how dis/ability elicits “stereotypic associations with weaknesses, including fears of individuals seen as unhealthy, unable to adequately compete in work and war” (24). Eva fears that Plum is weakened by his PTSD and addiction. She refuses to take care of her son, so she revokes his right to live. Eva reinforces eugenics through deciding whether or not her son can live, in her eyes, a fulfilling life.

However, to Eva a fulfilling life for a black man is tied to independence and labor. She further explains that murdering Plum was her way of protecting his manhood: ““I done everything I could to make him leave me and go on and live and be a man but he wouldn’t and I had to keep him out so I just thought of a way he could die like a man not all scrunched up inside my womb, but like a man”” (Morrison, *Sula* 72). Eva wanted her son to “die like a man” and not like a child. Her actions take on a eugenic role in the text in relation to mental illness in men. Critics have justified Eva’s murder because of Plum’s addiction. Elizabeth B. House compares Eva killing Plum to how “Soaphead kills the mangy dog that offends him” because Eva “cannot

tolerate life that is in less than perfect form” (35). Parvin Ghasemi compares the situation to Morrison’s *Beloved* where “Sethe, very much like Eva, makes a decision based on the excruciating circumstances which leave her with no choice at all” (247). Sethe commits infanticide to prevent her child from becoming a slave. Eva kills Plum because he has PTSD and is addicted to heroin. Susan Neal Mayberry writes that Eva “copes grimly for years with her own suffering, she cannot bear her boy’s, and, godlike, she sacrifices him in a baptism of fire. Plum represents the son protected but prevented from maturing by the love of the powerful black matriarch” (59). These critics perpetuate ableism by justifying Eva’s actions and comparing Plum to a “mangy dog,” a child destined for slavery, and a “son protected” by his mother’s “love.” Eva’s actions are clearly tied to Morrison’s definition of masculinity, a definition which refuses social capital to men who are not constantly autonomous. In contrast, Bailey and Mobley ask “What of disabled Black men who cannot work? Are they failed men because they do not meet the able-bodied expectations of liberation?” (26). Separating the notion of black bodies as designed for work with the reality that impairments dictate what types of work can be done counteracts both racist and ableist notions of what it means to be a black dis/abled man. For Plum, his PTSD and addiction create an embodied experience where he is not in a position to work. Eva decides the only way to prevent Plum from being a “failed man” is to put an end to his life, and therefore to put an end to his inability to work.

Morrison’s narrow definition of black masculinity not only emphasizes work, but emphasizes dark skin color. Tar Baby’s racial identity is less clear than other characters, but it nonetheless plays an important part in how he is treated throughout the novel. Tar Baby is “a beautiful, slight, quiet man who never spoke above a whisper. Most people said he was half white, but Eva said he was all white. That she knew blood when she saw it, and he didn’t have

none” (Morrison, *Sula* 39). It is a mystery where Tar Baby comes from and who his family is. His birth name is never given and he is only referred to by the mocking moniker Eva gives him to highlight his light complexion. There is a possibility that he is a mixed man who can pass as white because of his “milky skin and cornsilk hair” (40). However, Eva rejects this possibility because she believes she would be able to see Tar Baby’s blackness if he had any. This claim shows Eva’s ability to award or withhold social capital from others. Eva decides what is *true* regardless of what is *real*. Tar Baby experiences a similar dynamic to what Morrison explores in *Playing in the Dark*. Writing about Willa Cather’s *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, Morrison notes that “The absence of camaraderie between Nancy and the other slave women turns on the device of color fetish—the skin-color privilege that Nancy enjoys because she is lighter than the others and therefore enviable” (23). Nancy is rejected from the black women around her because they are envious of her lighter skin. In contrast, Eva rejects Tar Baby because he can pass for white. His social capital within a black community is tied to the darkness of his skin.

Tar Baby’s light skin and depression make him a target of racism and ableism. He receives apathy from the black community of Bottom. The people in his community see signs of his depression and view it as something that sets Tar Baby apart:

Hannah worried about him a little, but only a very little. For it soon became clear that he simply wanted a place to die privately but not quite alone. No one thought of suggesting to him that he pull himself together or see a doctor or anything ... There was, however, a measure of contempt in their indifference, for they had little patience with people who took themselves that seriously. Seriously enough to try to die. (Morrison, *Sula* 40-41)

In addition to being racially ostracized by Eva, Tar Baby is also rejected by his community because of his depression and suicidal ideation. No one considers trying to help Tar Baby. He is

largely ignored. Eventually, Tar Baby finds a measure of community with Shadrack and the Deweys for National Suicide Day, but that is only one day out of the year. In the end, Tar Baby dies in the tunnel collapse on the last National Suicide Day (*Sula* 162). The rest of the time Tar Baby's behavior is disregarded. It is important to note that Tar Baby and Plum have similar habits in the novel. Both show signs of depression and substance abuse. Both are the recipients of violence. Tar Baby, however, is ignored because he is racially mixed.

Tar Baby passes for white, but passing does not grant him any social capital among the white community either. For example, Tar Baby "stumbled drunk into traffic on the New River Road. A women driver swerved to avoid him and hit another car. When the police came, they recognized the woman as the mayor's niece and arrested Tar Baby" (*Sula* 132). Although Tar Baby did nothing other than stumble into the street, he is arrested. While this initially could seem racially motivated, later the police officer assumes Tar Baby is white (133). The police officer's choice of who to target could be class-based because of where Tar Baby lives, which he mentions later. However, another possibility is that this decision was based on who *looked* like the criminal in this situation. Tar Baby is drunk and it is well-established that he is usually unkempt or sickly. This situation recalls the history of the Unsightly Beggar Ordinances or "Ugly Laws" in America in which poor and dis/abled people would be removed from the streets because they were "ugly" (Tyler 186). These laws were not officially repealed until the institution of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. Therefore, the police officer would have legally ableist reasons for why to throw Tar Baby in jail.

Tar Baby's complete lack of social capital is tied to both race and dis/ability, resulting in the criminalization of the biracial, dis/abled body. When Ajax hears that Tar Baby has been arrested, he finds Tar Baby "twisted up in a corner badly beaten and dressed in nothing but

extremely soiled underwear” in his jail cell (Morrison, *Sula* 132). Tar Baby is characterized as an extremely passive character so it is unlikely he was beaten for provoking the police officers. Ajax confronts the police officer about how Tar Baby is being treated, but the police officer responds by making a comment about race: “The policeman, obviously in agreement with Eva, who had always maintained that Tar Baby was white, said that if the prisoner didn’t like to live in shit, he should come down out of those hills, and live like a decent white man” (133). It is clear again that Tar Baby can pass for white in this situation; however, Morrison recalls Eva’s thoughts on Tar Baby’s race here as well. Qualifying the police officer’s assumption here maintains a sense of doubt as to Tar Baby’s racial identity, which is something Tar Baby himself never speaks to. However, Tar Baby’s clearly constructed depression also calls to attention the history of imprisonment for people with disabilities. Dolmage writes that “The eugenics movement resulted in the institutionalization of millions of North Americans in asylums, ‘idiot schools,’ and other warehousing institutions, where people were abused, neglected, and, often, forcibly sterilized” (15). Asylums, mental hospitals, and imprisonment due to insanity were all methods of controlling the dis/abled body. Tar Baby is imprisoned, showcasing his complete lack of social capital, because of his racial ambiguity and his psychological dis/ability.

In contrast to Tar Baby’s lack of social capital, Eva Peace generates her own social capital through mythologizing her physical impairment. Eva has been praised by critics as a powerful figure in Morrison’s fiction and rightfully so. Eva commands authority and her amputation is shrouded in an aura of myth. The community “pretended to ignore [her amputation], unless, in some mood of fancy, she began some fearful story about it—generally to entertain children. How the leg got up by itself one day and walked off. How she hobbled after it but it ran too fast. Or how she had a corn on her toe and it just grew and grew and grew until her

whole foot was a corn and then it traveled on up her leg” (Morrison, *Sula* 30-31). Her physical impairment is a source of myth as no one truly knows how she lost her leg. Eva’s myths about her physical impairment is a form of the dozens, but these myths are jokes she makes about herself. Smith observes that the dozens highlights one’s dis/abled condition through its use of “dialectical dismemberment. Such dismemberment is ‘divine’ in the sense that through this critical comedic practice, the whole is retained in every part and, indeed, the whole is positively strengthened through the sparring that ironically attempts to undermine it” (293). While these stories exaggerate her dis/ability, it is only through this exaggeration that Eva “is positively strengthened.” Eva’s myths about her amputated leg serve to give her social capital, therefore giving Eva mythic power.

Eva’s mythic power deifies her within her community. Her relationship with others is symbolized by how they view her height: “The wagon was so low that children who spoke to her standing up were eye level with her, and adults, standing or sitting, had to look down at her. But they didn’t know it. They all had the impression that they were looking up at her, up into the open distances of her eyes, up into the soft black of her nostrils and up at the crest of her chin” (*Sula* 31). The people Eva interacts with all have a sense of looking up. Eva is a formidable presence and it is significant that no one looks down on her. She has no equal in the text. Eva’s presence has been likened by some scholars to the presence of a goddess (Mayberry 59; Thomson 117). Thomson claims “Eva’s disability augments her power and dignity, inspiring awe and becoming a mark of superiority, a residue of ennobling history” (117). It is clear why these scholars view Eva this way. She has power over naming and over the life and death of other characters, as seen with Tar Baby and Plum. Eva even creates a physical distance between her and other people by “leaving the bottom of the house more and more to those who lived there”

because “after 1910 she didn’t willingly set foot on the stairs but once” in order to kill Plum (Morrison, *Sula* 37). As a goddess, she does not interact with the humans other than to cast judgement upon them. Eva’s mythic power over others stems mostly from her physical impairment.

While Eva’s impairment grants her social capital, her impairment also physically limits her due to her home’s inaccessibility. Maybe Eva stays on the second floor because she is the goddess set apart from humanity. This does not eliminate the real-life challenge of navigating stairs with her physical impairment. When she goes to kill Plum, Eva is “amazed to find that she could still manage” her crutches and “the pain in her armpits was severe” (Morrison, *Sula* 45). She is “annoyed at her physical condition” (*Sula* 46). Most of the time, Eva uses a wagon as a makeshift wheelchair instead of crutches to get around. Her house does not have ramps or elevators that would make traveling between floors more accessible in her wheelchair. While Eva is able to travel up and down the stairs, it is a strenuous and painful activity for her. The physical barriers Morrison includes in the text is a reality for many people with physical impairments that impact their mobility. Reflecting on the history of the Disability Rights Movement, Dolmage notes that “the idea that disability is created by a social, physical, and educational environment shaped in ways that exclude” has been a central concern for activists (59). In Eva’s case, her home is “shaped in ways that exclude” her from the bottom floor. The difficulty Eva has moving between floors of her home is what truly dis/ables her. The inaccessibility of her home restricts Eva from reaching her daughter when Hannah catches on fire:

Eva knew there was time for nothing in this world other than the time it took to get there and cover her daughter’s body with her own. She lifted her heavy frame up on her good

leg, and with fists and arms smashed the window pane. Using her stump as a support on the window sill, her good leg as a lever, she threw herself out of the window. ... She missed and came crashing down some twelve feet from Hannah's smoke. (*Sula* 75-76).

There is no time for Eva to grab her crutches and make her way slowly down the stairs and outside to reach Hannah. Instead, Eva throws herself out of her second-story window to try to reach Hannah and smother the flames. But Eva cannot reach her. This is the moment where Eva begins to seem less and less powerful, less mythical. When Hannah and Eva are rushed to the hospital, the medics "forgot Eva, who would have bled to death except for Old Willy Fields ... Recognizing Eva at once he shouted to a nurse, who came to see if the bloody one-legged black woman was alive or dead" (*Sula* 77). Outside of Bottom, Eva loses her social capital from being mythologized. She is forgotten. Eva Peace becomes "the bloody one-legged black woman" instead of the almighty matriarch in Bottom.

The medical system, which has historically disregarded the physical pain of black women, reconstructs Eva as someone to be treated and fixed. This reality intersects with the medical model of dis/ability which views dis/abilities as illnesses to be treated. Bailey and Mobley address the intersectional concerns about the medical model of dis/ability: "Disability Studies' critiques of the medical field manage to understate or entirely ignore the historically exploitative relationship between Black communities and the medical field. ... While certainly the medical model is a problematic trope, it may signal differently to communities that have tried for many decades to receive the most elementary care only to be refused" (28). As seen with Eva being ignored in the hospital, black communities have struggled to have access to good medical care. In addition, the medical model strips Eva of the mythic power derived from her amputation by the community in Bottom. The most vivid example of this effect is when Sula comes back to

town. Sula tells Eva to “shut [her] mouth” to which Eva responds, “Don’t nobody talk to me like that. Don’t nobody...” (Morrison, *Sula* 92, ellipses in original). Sula responds: “This body does” and proceeds to confront Eva about how her leg was amputated (*Sula* 92-93). Sula disrespects Eva and distinguishes her able body from Eva’s dis/abled body. Eva has lost control of the Peace household and at the same time Sula emphasizes their bodily differences. Their interaction gets resolved when “two men came with a stretcher and [Eva] didn’t even have time to comb her hair before they strapped her to a piece of canvas” while Sula watches and holds “some paper against the wall, at the bottom of which, just above the word ‘guardian,’ she very carefully wrote Miss Sula Mae Peace” (*Sula* 94). Sula asserts control over Eva and decides where she belongs: in a nursing home. Sula is allowed to do this because Eva’s age and dis/ability signal she is not able to take care of herself once Eva is removed from her mythic context.

Developing social capital through mythologizing one’s dis/abilities is essential for Morrison’s black dis/abled characters in *Sula*. Throughout the novel, men with psychological dis/abilities have to navigate what it means to be a black man in their community, often with Eva deciding who has the right to be a man. Shadrack has the physical strength and independence that is essential to Morrison’s black masculinity. After WWI, Shadrack comes home with PTSD and copes by establishing National Suicide Day. His holiday, and his trauma, become inextricably part of Bottom. Therefore, Shadrack has mythic power throughout the novel. For Plum and Tar Baby, their psychological dis/abilities are combined with dependence on others and passivity. Their lack of black masculinity, as defined by Eva, results in both of their deaths. Eva kills Plum for not being masculine enough for her. Tar Baby dies through Shadrack’s National Suicide Day, but no one thinks to help him before this point because Eva establishes he

is not part of the black community. Eva, Morrison's second matriarch with a physical impairment, has mythic power like Shadrack. She is able to control the people in her community, but as soon as she leaves her home Eva loses her power over others. In the hospital, Eva is forgotten and left to die until a neighbor from Bottom reminds the nurses of her presence. Eva returns to Bottom, but her mythic power does not return with her. Sula comes home, asserting her able-body over Eva's dis/abled body. Sula sends Eva off to a nursing home and assumes the role of the Peace family matriarch. The mythologizing of dis/ability continues in Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977), albeit in a more nuanced manner.

“Without ever leaving the ground, she could fly”: Enabling Ancestry in *Song of Solomon*

After myth is disrupted by the medical in *Sula*, myth is again taken up in Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* but this time in terms of flight. Morrison’s concept of flight is connected to ancestry and is usually balanced by having one’s feet firmly on the ground. Writing about black culture, Morrison notes that “We are very practical people, very down-to-earth, even shrewd people. But within that practicality we also accepted what I suppose could be called superstition and magic, which is another way of knowing things” (“Rootedness” 400). In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison’s characters with dis/abilities must learn how to accept black history. They must accept “superstition and magic” while staying “down-to-earth.” However, most of these characters meet tragic fates. Robert Smith dies through a suicide, Pilate Dead is shot, and Milkman Dead is arguably killed as well. Eliminating all of the dis/abled characters in a novel holds true to the kill or cure trope in literature. However, eugenics is present in this novel beyond concerns of ability. Morrison contends with the historical murders of black people by white people, such as the murder of Emmett Till. These murders are avenged as a way to keep racial balance and portrays white people in terms of dis/ability in order to justify eugenically-motivated murder. Throughout *Song of Solomon*, Morrison uses dis/ability as a means to connect with black ancestry and to protect black progeny.

Pilate Dead, Morrison’s third dis/abled matriarch, internalizes ableist shame before she can rise to the powerful, mythic character she was intended to be. Morrison decided to not give Pilate a navel because her bodily difference “had to be a thing that was very powerful in its absence but of no consequence in its presence. It couldn’t be anything grotesque, but something to set her apart, to make her literally invent herself” (qtd in Thomson 120). Thomson argues that Pilate’s missing navel warrants reading her through a dis/ability lens. For Morrison, Pilate’s

missing navel is mythic. It allows Pilate to birth herself. Before Pilate can create herself, she must first learn to cope with ableist shame. When Pilate is confronted about not having a navel the first time, “she had never seen another woman’s stomach. And from the horror on the older woman’s face she knew there was something wrong with not having it” (*Song* 143). Her friend is horrified by Pilate not having a navel. The response causes Pilate to internalize shame where she had originally thought nothing of it. In order to avoid similar responses from others, Pilate moves and decides that “All she had to do, she thought, was keep her belly covered” (*Song* 146). Pilate attempts to pass for able-bodied. Hiding her stomach from anyone, even to the extent that she refuses to get married, would allow her to live her life without people reacting to her smooth stomach. Thomson notes that when “disabled people pursue normalization too much, they risk denying limitations and pain for the comfort of others and may edge into the self-betrayal associated with ‘passing’” (Thomson 13). While Pilate creates herself, she still has ancestors. Passing creates a betrayal of self, but also a betrayal of ancestry. Pilate hides and denies her physical body, thus denying the creation of self Morrison intends for her.

Eventually Pilate comes to accept her physical difference and through rejecting her ableist shame she redefines herself as the ancestor. Pilate “stopped worrying about her stomach, and stopped trying to hide it. It occurred to her that although men fucked armless women, one-legged women, hunchbacks and blind women, drunken women, razor-toting women, midgets, small children, convicts, boys, sheep, goats, dogs, goats, liver, each other, and even certain species of plants, they were terrified of fucking her—a woman with no navel” (*Song* 148). She accepts her bodily difference and contrasts men’s desire for her with men’s desire for, in her eyes, less desirable bodies. In order to establish her independence, she must construct herself as the normate. Thomson defines normate as “the constructed identity of those who, by way of the

bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them” (8). Pilate constructs her identity as “a position of authority” and gives herself permission to “wield” the fear her dis/ability elicits in others. Through rejecting shame and discovering her power, Pilate is able to redefine herself in terms of ancestry instead of lack. Morrison confesses that in this novel “Pilate is the ancestor” (“Rootedness” 402). She is the one character that discovers how to live both superstitiously and rationally. Accepting her body, even at the expense of other dis/abled bodies, gives Pilate an opportunity to claim herself.

Through accepting her dis/ability, Pilate is able to construct herself, but she is also constructed by the community through her dis/ability. Pilate is a strong woman and part of her strength comes from the mystery of her missing navel. Despite this, Pilate reflects on the fact that “Even a traveling side show would have rejected her, since her freak quality lacked that important ingredient—the grotesque. There was really nothing to see. Her defect, frightening and exotic as it was, was also a theatrical failure” (*Song* 148). To Pilate, her missing navel is not enough to turn her into a “freak” but others do not share her beliefs. There may be no inherent theatrics about her smooth stomach, but that does not prevent others from inventing theatrics around it. To Milkman and Guitar, Pilate— “the woman his father had forbidden him to go near—had both of them spellbound” (*Song* 36). One of the first questions Guitar asks Pilate upon meeting her for the first time is ““Do you have a navel?”” to which she responds with a simple ““No”” (*Song* 37). Her missing navel is foregrounded as essential to her character. It is the feature people make up stories about. The feature that horrifies people. People make up stories about who Pilate is and call her a “lizard” and a “snake” (*Song* 48; *Song* 54). The community sees Pilate as someone “who never bothered anybody, was helpful to everybody, but who also was believed to have the power to step out of her skin, set a bush afire from fifty yards, and turn

a man into a ripe rutabaga—all on account of the fact that she had no navel” (*Song* 94). From an animal to a witch, Pilate is turned into a freak show in her community. She is a source of myth and entertainment because of her bodily difference. Thomson writes about freak shows in America, stating that “By exoticizing and trivializing bodies that were physically nonconformist, the freak show symbolically contained the potential threat that difference among the polity might erupt as anarchy” (66). Turning Pilate into a mythic character exoticizes her body. Keeping Pilate’s body mythic emphasizes the difference between her body and other bodies. Therefore, Pilate becomes an anarchic figure in the novel, which is why she cannot survive in the end.

Pilate finds balance between myth and reality, but dies after serving her purpose of guiding Milkman to reconnect with his ancestry. When Milkman and Guitar first visit Pilate she is a “lady who had one earring, no navel, and looked like a tall black tree” (Morrison, *Song* 39). A tree is both firmly rooted in the ground and can reach up into the sky. It is both grounded and in flight. Likewise, Pilate is both sensible and superstitious. She is the perfect person to teach Milkman how to achieve this balance because of her ability to balance these forms of knowledge. However, Guitar accidentally shoots and kills Pilate which causes Milkman to reflect on “why he loved her so” and he concludes that it is because “Without ever leaving the ground, she could fly” (*Song* 336). Pilate is such a strong, influential character that it is jarring when she dies. Having been constructed as strong and perfectly balanced, it only makes sense for Pilate to die so that Milkman can reflect on her influence on him. Because of this Pilate ends up like Thomson’s “prototypical disabled figure, who often functions as a lightning rod for the pity, fear, discomfort, guilt, or sense of normalcy of the reader or a more significant character” (15). Pilate is key to Milkman’s development and sense of normalcy. She encourages him to believe in myths and to reconnect with his people. She is feared by those in her community. However, once

she has served her purpose of helping Milkman to connect with his ancestry, she dies. Mayberry argues that Pilate “never truly dies just as she is never truly born” (113). If one never dies and is never born, then one does not exist at all. Pilate does truly die, but Mayberry’s phrasing highlights that Pilate does not really get a chance to exist. For Pilate, her main role is to guide others instead of to truly live herself.

In contrast with Pilate whose dis/ability is forcibly erased from the narrative, the men with dis/abilities in *Song of Solomon* must erase their dis/abilities in order to connect with their ancestry and to participate in black masculinity. Dis/ability is introduced in the novel by Robert Smith’s mental illness magically turning into Milkman’s physical impairment. Robert Smith’s suicide frames Milkman’s life: “Mr. Smith’s blue silk wings must have left their mark, because when the little boy discovered, at four, the same thing Mr. Smith learned earlier—that only birds and airplanes could fly—he lost all interest in himself” (Morrison, *Song* 9). Flight connects Robert to Milkman in terms of their interests in life; however, even more significant is the timing of Robert’s death and Milkman’s birth. Robert dies and “The next day a colored baby was born inside Mercy for the first time” (*Song* 9). The timing of these events suggests that Milkman is Robert reborn. He is Milkman’s ancestor through dis/ability. However, instead of a mental illness like Robert had, Milkman has a physical impairment: “By the time Milkman was fourteen he had noticed that one of his legs was shorter than the other. When he stood barefoot and straight as a pole, his left foot was about half an inch off the floor” (*Song* 62). One of his feet is consistently planted on the ground, but his other leg is suspended in the air. Milkman, therefore, is in a constant state of flying while he is on the ground. He avoids this because Milkman “never stood straight; he slouched or leaned or stood with a hip thrown out, and he never told anybody about [his impairment]—ever” (*Song* 62). Refusing to accept his impairment and his liminal

position of being on the ground and in flight, Milkman hides his dis/ability. He disconnects with both the myth and practicality of his ancestry.

Because Milkman refuses to connect with his ancestry for most of the book, he remains in a state of childhood and is separated from black culture. As a child, Ruth's friends call Milkman "'peculiar,'" "'deep.' Even mysterious" (*Song* 9, 10). Milkman is associated with oddity. To a lesser extent, Milkman is also considered part of the freak show. Even his name, "milkman," is bestowed upon him by a spectator of his mother nursing him when he was no longer an infant (*Song* 13-15). Milkman's name is a constant reminder throughout his life that his mother wants him to stay a child forever. Like Plum Peace, the black, dis/abled man's body is infantilized. As Kevin A. Morrison notes, characterizing dis/abled men as infants was a fairly common practice: "Infantilized, feminized, or animalized at different historical moments, disabled men were seen as having more in common with women than with able-bodied men" (284). Men with dis/abilities have been considered less than men throughout history. Masculinity has traditionally been linked to physical strength, control, and a rejection of perceived weaknesses. The dis/abled male body challenges what it means to be a man. For Milkman, he is continuously characterized as naïve and out of touch with what it means to be black in America. In fact, Milkman is characterized as having more in common with white people than black people before he discovers his family's past.

Milkman relates more to white people than other black people because of his dis/ability and his grandmother's ambiguous racial identity. Milkman "favored [his shorter leg], believing it was polio, and felt secretly connected to the late President Roosevelt for that reason" (Morrison, *Song* 62). *Song of Solomon*, along with the rest of Morrison's work, addresses the socially constructed and embodied experiences of being black in America. However, Milkman identifies

at this point in the novel most heavily with FDR, a white president who had a physical impairment assumedly due to polio at the time. This information is put in direct contrast with how Milkman feels about his father who “had no imperfection and age seemed to strengthen him. Milkman feared his father, respected him, but knew, because of the leg, that he could never emulate him” (*Song* 63). Milkman identifies his physical impairment as the reason why he cannot live up to his father’s legacy. Although he is his father’s only son, Milkman still feels attachment based on dis/ability status rather than familial ties or even race. Being out of touch with his blackness is also suggested because of Milkman’s grandmother. His father, Macon Dead, claims that Milkman’s grandmother was “‘Light-skinned, pretty. Looked like a white woman’” (*Song* 54). Similarly, Guitar later claims that Macon “‘behaves like a white man, thinks like a white man’” (*Song* 223). Both Macon and Milkman’s grandmother, Sing, are connected with whiteness. Although it is discovered that Sing was Native American and could pass for white, whiteness pervades the text as an insult. Bennett argues that “the act of passing for white presents special challenges to those who need the past” (209). Passing adds an additional barrier to the past. Since the entire novel depends on Milkman discovering his past, passing is an obstacle he must overcome. He must re-establish his family’s origins and remove white passing from his lineage. Once Milkman connects with his past, his dis/ability and suggested whiteness both disappear.

The only time in the novel where Milkman seems to accept his physical impairment as part of his body is when he begins to understand where his family is from. After being attacked by Guitar in the woods, Milkman leaves “Walking [on the ground] like he belonged on it; like his legs were stalks, tree trunks, a part of his body that extended down down down into the rock and soil, and were comfortable there—on the earth and on the place where he walked. And he

did not limp” (281). Like Pilate, Milkman is associated with a tree once he can connect with his ancestry. His physical impairment is noted but only in terms of its absence. He no longer limps. No longer overcompensates for what he believed was his secret flaw. Instead, Milkman now has both feet firmly planted on the ground and believes in the mythology surrounding his family, namely the belief that his great-grandfather flew back to Africa. This is a key moment for Milkman. As Cormier-Hamilton writes, “Unlike characters in traditional naturalism, in black naturalistic fiction this important sense of identity can only be achieved by embracing the past” (124). Once Milkman embraces the past, he discovers his identity. Reconnecting with his ancestry, however, is juxtaposed with losing his dis/ability. This trend is highlighted by Mitchell and Snyder because “minority commentators tend to situate disability as a social grouping from which they must escape to assert the positivity of their own culturally devalued identity” (33). Escaping dis/ability is integral to Milkman discovering the positivity of blackness. He cannot connect with his cultural ancestry until both feet are comfortably on the ground, both literally and figuratively.

While Milkman’s dis/ability is erased for him to connect with his ancestry, Robert Smith’s dis/ability is eliminated in order to protect black progeny. Robert Smith, an insurance agent in the community, writes a letter stating that he “will take off from Mercy and fly away on [his] own wings” (*Song* 3). It is a note about flight, but it is also a note about suicide. In this way, mental illness becomes associated with the underlying theme of the book: the myth of slaves flying back to Africa. This association draws a clear connection between dis/ability and blackness, but also assigns mental illness to the realm of myth. Thomson argues that “Myth allows the novels to put aside the dominant perspective and to establish a space—like Eva’s, Pilate’s, or Baby Sugg’s houses—where things are run differently” (124). Mythologizing mental

illness allows the narrative to balance both superstition and sensibility. This balance depends on Robert's flight into the pavement. For Thomson, Robert's image on top of Mercy Hospital "refers to and is interpreted by a shared cultural image of disturbed suicidal people perched on ledges above absorbed crowds. Such a presentation, along with Mr. Smith's splat on the pavement, confirms common everyday experience, the status quo" (123). Thomson connects myth primarily with women in Morrison's work and thus considers Robert's suicide "the status quo." This interpretation ignores the fact that his suicide is being presented through the myth of flight. It is through mental illness that Morrison is able to connect the mythic and the "everyday" together, which is her main objective in *Song of Solomon*.

The people who witness Robert's suicide interpret him not through myth, but through racist and ableist ideologies. Robert's "conviction that he could fly" draws a crowd of black people to the front of the hospital (Morrison, *Song* 5). The white hospital staff first think that the crowd is "one of those things that racial uplift groups were always organizing," but when they go outside "The sight of Mr. Smith and his wide blue wings transfixed them for a few seconds... Some of them thought briefly that this was probably some form of worship" (*Song* 6). The white hospital staff are reading Robert's depression and disconnection from reality in terms of a racist ideology. Instead of immediately seeking to help the man, they assume that Robert is part of a pagan religious ceremony. The white hospital staff's response is reminiscent of observers at a freak show. Thomson explains that "Freak shows acted out a relationship in which exoticized disabled people and people of color functioned as physical opposites of the idealized American" (64-65). In this case, the "idealized American" is an "American who claims the normate position of masculine, white, nondisabled, sexually unambiguous, and middle class" (64). If a white man were on the roof in a winged costume and preparing to jump these people probably would not

have assumed the situation could be a form of worship. The staff hesitates. They wait to have someone find a guard or call the fire department. They wait because Robert is a spectacle, a freak show, to them.

Similarly, the black community is apathetic to Robert's mental illness and turns him into a freak show. Guitar's grandma watches Robert on the roof and in response to Guitar's question, "You reckon he'll jump?", she tells him that "A nutwagon do anything" (Morrison, *Song 7*). Robert is characterized as a "nutwagon" and becomes a spectacle for the town. He is thought of as crazy because of his suicidal ideation, but it is not certain whether or not he will jump. Before his decision to end his life, Robert was so unremarkable in their minds that "Jumping from the roof of Mercy was the most interesting thing he had done. None of them had suspected he had it in him" (*Song 8-9*). His mental illness becomes a point of interest and is what distinguishes Robert from the rest of his community. With this characterization of a black man with a mental illness, it is no wonder that, like Plum, Robert is quickly eliminated from the narrative.

Unknown to these communities, Robert's mental illness is produced from his retributive justice in order to protect black people. Even before Robert's decision to jump, the community hated him because of his job as an insurance agent even though "they thought he was probably a nice man. But he was heavily associated with illness and death" (*Song 8*). Death and illness characterize Robert's life in both his job and his emotional wellbeing. This is made clearer when Guitar finally reveals that Robert was part of the Seven Days, a group of seven black men that seek retributive justice against every white person who murders a black person and gets away with it. Guitar explains the rules of the secret society and tells Milkman that if murdering white people "ever gets to be too much, like it was for Robert Smith, we do *that* rather than crack and tell somebody" (*Song 158*). Suicide becomes an honorable method of protecting the Seven Days,

and therefore of protecting black people in general. Instead of being a tragedy due to the psychological trauma of murdering others for years, suicide is sacrificial. Mayberry notes this because through Robert's suicide "he both sacrifices himself to protect the Seven Days' identities and transcends his participation in depravity" (99). For Robert, his suicide is an escape from "depravity." Therefore, when Morrison connects his suicide to flight it is not only a combination of the mythical and the real, it is an enactment of the myth itself. *Song of Solomon*, as Mayberry writes, "rests deep within racial memory" because "Many spirituals perpetuate a mythologized 'escape' of subject peoples as inspiration for those who would follow" (76). Through his suicide, Robert escapes the eugenic mission of the Seven Days and serves as an "inspiration for those" to follow. He chooses to protect the mission instead of telling anyone what has been going on. So, while his death is the elimination of yet another dis/ability in the novel, it is done in order to protect black progeny.

The mission of the Seven Days is the most violent form of eugenics in Morrison's early work. Guitar explains to Milkman that "White people are unnatural. As a race they are unnatural. And it takes a strong effort of the will to overcome an unnatural enemy" (Morrison, *Song* 156). He makes claims that characterize white people as a single unit. To Guitar, and the Seven Days by extension, white people are the enemies of black people. Guitar goes so far as to claim that "The disease [white people] have is in their blood, in the structure of their chromosomes" (*Song* 157). Rationalizing the retributive murders through pseudoscientific claims, Guitar believes that whiteness is a reason for death. This dynamic flips the historical pseudoscientific claims that white people have presented for why black people are designed for labor, mentally inferior, or sub-human. All of these claims are based in eugenics. Dolmage writes that "Eugenics works to strongly ground inferences about social worth in biological formulae,

using science to suggest that differences between people are predetermined, genetic, and immutable” (59). All of Guitar’s social claims are rooted in biology. Because these claims are biological, he reinforces a dynamic where it is impossible to reconcile differences. While these claims could suggest the extermination of white people as a species, Guitar argues to maintain balance: ““Nothing can cure them, and if it keeps on there won’t be any of us left and there won’t be any land for those who are left. So the numbers have to remain static ... the ratio can’t widen in their favor”” (Morrison, *Song* 158). He is concerned with the “ratio” of black people to white people. Guitar views his mission as one that will secure resources for future generations. Therefore, through eugenic logic, the Seven Days violently protect black progeny.

This mission is complicated by the fact that Guitar murders Pilate and possibly Milkman, suggesting that black people with dis/abilities are also expendable. When Guitar is explaining the rules for the Seven Days, he clarifies that they ““don’t off Negroes”” (*Song* 161). He makes it clear that the Seven Days only kill white people. This rule is not followed in the novel. Guitar hunts Milkman for the gold he believes Milkman has found. When Pilate and Milkman go to bury her father at Solomon’s Leap, Guitar shoots and kills Pilate (*Song* 335-336). After she dies, a bird ““dived into [her father’s] grave and scooped something shiny in its beak before it flew away”” (*Song* 336). The bird picks up Pilate’s earring that she had placed on her father’s name. The earring contained her name, written by her father on the day she was born. Symbolically, the bird suggests Pilate flying away from Solomon’s Leap. Milkman knows that Guitar killed Pilate by “mistake” and instead of running away, Milkman “leaped ... toward Guitar and it did not matter which one of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms of his brother” (*Song* 337). The ending of the novel is ambiguous, as is common in many of Morrison’s novels. Milkman may have been killed by Guitar or he could have killed Guitar. However, the simple fact that

Milkman was being hunted down at all conflicts with the Seven Days' rules about who to kill. So if the Seven Days do not kill black people, what does this say about who counts as black? Since Milkman and Pilate are the only two black people killed by the Seven Days, it suggests that their dis/abilities remove them from blackness. Having already associated Milkman with whiteness through his dis/ability and his family history, the narrative gives Guitar permission to eliminate dis/ability by the end of the novel.

In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison eliminates dis/ability as a means to center blackness throughout the novel. Pilate, Morrison's ancestor figure, can only reach her full potential when she accepts her body, missing navel and all. Once she accepts herself, Pilate is able to create herself and to be mythologized by others. She becomes a powerful character and can aid Milkman in his own journey of discovery. Milkman's dis/ability disappears once he discovers his ancestry. Instead of self-acceptance like Pilate, Milkman must uncover the past in order to accept myth and sensibility. These two characters reconnect with their ancestry throughout the novel. In contrast, Robert Smith and Guitar fight to protect black progeny. Both part of the Seven Days society, Robert and Guitar use death as a way to protect others. The psychological toll of murder results in Robert's depression and subsequent suicide. He kills himself instead of revealing the secret of the Seven Days. This is portrayed as mythic, realist, and protectionist at different times in the novel. However, through his depression, Robert is able to embody myth and reality, enacting the mythic escape his flight is based on. Guitar is a more recent addition to the Seven Days. He takes it upon himself to explain the eugenics behind their society. Whiteness is constructed as biologically inferior and a reason for deserving death. While the Seven Days agree to not murder black people, Guitar murders Pilate and arguably Milkman. Because he murders the only two remaining characters who have dis/abilities, it suggests that the Seven

Days' eugenicist logic extends beyond whiteness and forces the question of what it means to be black. Morrison's construction of blackness in the novel is only possible at the expense of dis/ability. Therefore, *Song of Solomon*, acclaimed for how Morrison explores the condition of black masculinity, reveals the centrality of dis/ability in defining blackness.

Conclusion

Toni Morrison's first three novels contain complex interplay between race and ability. Morrison constructs characters who must navigate their identities based on these social and embodied experiences, often experiencing pain and social isolation. However, a close reading of these novels reveals that Morrison's co-construction of race and ability suggests more than any simple interpretation could offer. At times dis/ability is a means of communicating cultural traumas, other times dis/ability serves as a criticism for which bodies can participate in black masculinity, and other times dis/ability signals which bodies can participate in blackness at all. Overall, Morrison challenges racist ideologies consistently throughout her early work. She achieves this through constructing dis/ability in ways that uplift blackness, whether that is through empowering or ableist representations of dis/abled characters.

In *The Bluest Eye*, physical impairment and generational trauma remind the reader of the eugenicist logic inherent in American beauty standards. Eugenics dictate who can live, prosper, and procreate based on pseudoscientific assumptions about a specific trait. In American history, both blackness and dis/ability have been disparaged as less than human. This joint history is especially damaging for characters like Pauline who is a black woman with a physical impairment. Pauline internalizes racism and ableism. She attempts to prostheticize her impairment through faith, labor, and sex appeal. These prosthetics only emphasize her dis/ability. When Cholly fetishizes her broken foot, Pauline temporarily accepts her dis/ability. However, Cholly's affections turn to Pecola when she reaches reproductive maturity.

Pecola is raped by Cholly, highlighting issues of eugenics and generational trauma. While Pauline's foot is the erotic inspiration of Cholly's desire, his fetish is ultimately transferred to their able-bodied, young daughter. Fetishizing the dis/abled body but locating the expression of

desire in an able body participates in ableist and eugenic logic. Ableist ideology situates the dis/abled body as asexual. Eugenic ideology removes the dis/abled body from sexual reproduction. The transference of sexual desire results in the traumatic rape of Pecola Breedlove by her father and Pecola's dissociation by the end of the novel.

For Cholly, violent sexuality is tied to the oppression he experienced in his youth at the hands of white men. He redirects this trauma onto Pecola's body by raping her. This traumatic event showcases the racist belief that black women's bodies are hypersexual and thus deserving of sexual abuse. Pecola has already internalized racist beliefs before this point in the novel, but the violent expression of racist ideologies produces her psychological dissociation. The entire community redirects their internalized racism onto Pecola's body by insulting her and abusing her. Because of this, Pecola embodies the generational trauma of the entire community.

Generational trauma results in the dis/embodyed experience of dissociation. She cannot cope with the trauma that has happened to her, so Pecola clings to the belief that she magically got blue eyes. Because of her PTSD, her friends abandon Pecola. Claudia and Frieda justify themselves because of Pecola's dis/ability but this only reinforces ableist notions that dis/ability is a justified reason to remove someone from a group.

In *Sula*, Morrison frames mental illness as a justification for abuse; however, in this novel she focuses primarily on men returning from war. Opening and closing the novel with Shadrack, Morrison at times awards men with mental illnesses extraordinary power. Shadrack is able to determine on what day many of the townspeople will die. His mythic power is in part allowed because of his physical strength. Unlike Plum, Shadrack can live on his own and provide for himself. Plum, on the other hand, is eliminated because his mental illness and addiction make it difficult for him to participate in daily activities. By connecting the reason for Plum's murder to

his inability to care for himself, Morrison draws on the eugenic history behind both race and ability in America. Forced sterilization and other programs forced people of color and people with dis/abilities out of reproductive spaces. The ideology of eugenics is further noted in the treatment of one of the few mixed characters Morrison writes in her first few books, *Tar Baby*. While his racial identity is unclear, there is reason to believe *Tar Baby* is half black and half white. However, the mixing of races is rejected by both Eva and the white police officer. They both characterize *Tar Baby* as white. However, his racial passing does him no favors. *Tar Baby* is clearly depressed throughout the novel and haunts the narrative. He does not speak, has no name, and has no people. His presence only highlights his absence in the novel, which ends up commenting on the social experiences of both mixed people and people with mental illnesses.

However, reigning over most of the novel is Eva, the matriarch with an amputated leg. Eva is a strong woman. Like Pauline, she commands her household. She is able to control people's names and lives, even to the point of deciding who can live and who can die. This is particularly poignant when Eva decides to kill Plum because of his depression and addiction. These instances, as well as how Eva is placed physically above others, show how she is mythologized throughout the novel. The myths surrounding Eva's dis/ability award her power within her community.

While many critics have viewed Eva as a goddess-figure, there are some limits to her power. Once Eva leaves her second story sanctuary she loses her power. She is forgotten in the hospital but is kept from dying, which is what she wanted. Eva is no longer in control of her own life, let alone anyone else's. Sula comes back into town and displaces Eva from her home. Reminiscent of asylums in early 20th century America, the dis/abled body is segregated from the able body. The medical system, and therefore the medical view of dis/ability, ends up being

Eva's downfall. In other words, as Garland-Thomson notes, "we expect medicine to wipe away all disability" (524-525). Medicine does not necessarily remove Eva's dis/ability. The medical system, however, certainly removes Eva's mythic power in the second half of the novel.

In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison presents dis/ability as a means to protect blackness. The sections where she writes about dis/ability are shorter and further in-between than her previous novels; however, she begins the novel with the suicide of a minor character, Mr. Robert Smith. Robert's suicidal "flight" off of Mercy Hospital is based on the myth that slaves flew back to Africa to escape their masters. His mental illness is intricately tied to slave mythology and African American culture. The tension with this tie is that it mythologizes mental illness, taking away from the embodied experience Robert has. Myth flows throughout the novel, and Robert is seemingly reincarnated in Milkman Dead. Milkman is born with a similar fascination with flight that Robert had. However, Milkman has a physical impairment instead of a mental illness. His physical impairment is a defining characteristic for his own self-image and, much like Pauline, Milkman internalizes ableism. He believes his shorter leg must be hidden and that it will prevent him from being like his father. His leg is what narratively indicates a separation from his family's history, from his roots. Only when Milkman is able to connect with his roots does his physical impairment appear to be cured.

Pilate, Milkman's aunt, goes through a similar journey of self-discovery. When Pilate first learns that not having a navel is unusual, she is ashamed and tries to hide her bodily difference. She allows this shame to keep her from forming any long-term romantic attachment, with her anxiety specifically culminating around the idea of getting married. Eventually, Pilate stops hiding her smooth stomach. She accepts her body and in so doing accepts the mythic power her bodily difference gives her. Because of this, Pilate is characterized as freakish. The

community around her grants her witch-like powers and constructs a mythology around her physical difference. Her connection with herself and her past is what helps Pilate to become a powerful character. However, in the end Pilate dies. Both Pilate and Milkman die which means that all of the characters with either a mental illness, physical impairment, or physical difference die in the novel. This forces the reader to consider if this book also contends with eugenics on the basis of ability since it already clearly contends with eugenics on the basis of race.

The Seven Days society is founded on the eugenic belief that white people are biologically “unnatural” and deserve to die. Guitar argues that this is all in the service of black people and keeping the balance between the two races. When Guitar decides to kill Milkman, his judgement is called into question. Milkman is a black man, so what differentiates him from other black people that Guitar is not allowed to kill? His dis/ability and his biracial ancestry. Milkman is connected to whiteness through both his dis/ability and his ancestry. Although his grandmother is found to be Native American, her ability to pass as white still connects Milkman and, therefore, Pilate to whiteness. This connection justifies the elimination of the two characters with physical dis/abilities in the text. This connection also forces one to question if Morrison’s construction of blackness gives space for the dis/abled body. It does not appear to in her early work.

A close reading of race and ability in literature is messy. As Mitchell and Snyder note, “Representation inevitably spawns discontent” (40). There is no easy way to account for the social and embodied experience of both race and ability within a society that has been constructed to view bodies that are Other than white and hyper-able as less than human. When considering how race and ability have been co-constructed in American history in order to oppress the Other, it becomes especially necessary to closely examine how they are co-

constructed in literature. Toni Morrison's body of work has notably been praised for how she explores blackness in America. Her work has even been praised for how she explores physical ability in America. However, in literature like hers it is important to consider the implications of these identities intersectionally. Annamma et al. describe the importance of this intersectional work powerfully: "racism and ableism are normalizing processes that are interconnected and collusive. In other words, racism and ableism often work in ways that are unspoken, yet racism validates and reinforces ableism, and ableism validates and reinforces racism" (14). Often racism and ableism travel together. So, in literature that obviously contends with race, like Morrison's, it is necessary to investigate how she constructs ability as well. In literature that obviously contends with dis/ability, it is necessary to investigate the construction of race as well. In American literature in particular, the historical ramifications of pseudoscientific, eugenic rationales for punishing nonwhite, dis/abled bodies pervades the literature as much as it pervades the history. Regardless of how Morrison's writing may or may not have developed, reading both race and ability in a text is important. It forces us to reflect on the history of eugenics, pseudoscience, and segregation. It makes us question where strength comes from, what myth suggests, and what bodies are sanctioned when.

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