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# Cultural Consumption and Rejection of Precious Jones: Pushing Disability into the Discussion of Sapphire's *Push* and Lee Daniels's *Precious*

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*Sapphire's novel Push (1996) and Lee Daniels's film Precious (2009) provide multiple and intersecting representations of race, gender, and class, which have been recognized and analyzed by film critics and academics. The representations of disability in the novel and film, however, have rarely been connected to these categories of identity (or oppression). Because disability—"obesity," Down syndrome, HIV—and culturally pathologized and disabling traits—illiteracy, poverty, abuse—are intricately woven into rhetorical discussions about the film, critical disability studies provides a crucial theoretical framework for analyzing the cultural consumption of Precious Jones. Resisting either a blanket celebration or dismissal of Precious, the article argues that the intense emotional reactions evoked by the film—from inspiration to repulsion—have much to say about the broader cultural tensions around reading disability within the registers of race, gender, and class dynamics. The article focuses on systemic, intersecting forces of oppression by placing into dialogue Daniels's film, Sapphire's novel, and the popular public discourse around the film. Central to this analysis is the figure of Precious Jones—embodied by actress Gabourey Sidibe—and the "problems" this figure elicits and reveals.*

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Upon the release in 2009 of Lee Daniels's film *Precious: Based on the Novel Push by Sapphire*, a wide range of critical commentary ignited—from praise of the film's Oscar-worthiness to dismissals of it as "poverty porn" (Marble 2009). The

film narrates the self-determined redemption of Precious Jones, a poor, teenage African American girl who is relentlessly abused by both parents, impregnated—twice—by her father, and betrayed by the educational and social-service systems put in place to sustain and protect her. Many critics condemned the film for its profoundly negative racial portrayals, and indeed, the abusive figures of Precious’s parents summon many of the worst racialized stereotypes of the U.S. urban poor. Precious’s mother, Mary Jones, shamelessly defrauds the welfare system and abandons Precious to her craven, sadistic father, who repeatedly and remorselessly rapes her. The representation of Precious herself as an illiterate, “obese,”<sup>1</sup> HIV-positive teenage mother of two, while admittedly highlighting her victimization, has also been seen by some critics as perniciously re-inscribing negative racial and gender stereotypes. At the same time, it bears noting that Sapphire wrote *Push* after working closely with young women in Harlem who were living through crisis situations similar to those of the fictional Precious Jones, and that, by shining a light on this extreme story of incest, abuse, and social neglect, her novel and Daniels’s film do important cultural work of exposing personal and systemic dehumanization experienced by real people whose struggles often go unnoticed.

Concerns about potentially racist and sexist images must be taken seriously, of course, especially considering the accolades the film received from predominantly white viewing audiences. At this point, the mainstream critical success of *Precious* is well known. In the early months of 2010, the film nearly swept the Indie Spirit Awards and was nominated for several Golden Globes and Oscars—including best picture—with Mo’Nique claiming both awards for her portrayal of Precious’s cruel mother, Mary Jones. Yet, even as the film has been widely celebrated, the controversy surrounding its depiction of African American families and its protagonist remains compelling. Resisting either a blanket celebration or dismissal of *Precious*, I argue that the intense emotional reactions evoked by the film—from inspiration to repulsion—have much to say about the broader cultural tensions around reading disability within the registers of race, gender, and class dynamics. This essay focuses upon systemic, intersecting forces of oppression by placing Daniels’s film, Sapphire’s novel, and the popular public discourse concerning the film into dialogue. Central to this analysis is the figure of Precious Jones—embodied by actress Gabourey Sidibe—and the “problems” this figure elicits and reveals.

As a pregnant victim of incest living in public housing, Precious immediately evokes troubling cultural assumptions about race, gender, and class, which have been noted and analyzed by film critics and scholars. However, while much of the emotional power of this figure derives from pathologized traits, the presence of disability has rarely been part of the critical discussion of Precious’s identity (or oppression). Notably, the forces of poverty, sexual abuse, illiteracy, obesity, HIV, and having a daughter with Down syndrome coalesce to haunt Precious with disability. This is not an attempt to situate disability as more

salient than race, poverty, or gender, but because disability—obesity, Down syndrome, HIV—and culturally-pathologized and disabling traits—illiteracy, poverty, abuse—are intricately woven into rhetorical discussions about the film, critical disability studies provides a crucial theoretical framework for analyzing the cultural consumption of Precious.

In their recent collection *The Problem Body: Projecting Disability on Film*, Sally Chivers and Nicole Markotić (2011) introduce the “problem body” as a theoretical framework for thinking through multiple intersecting oppressions. Drawing upon Louis Althusser’s conceptualization of “problematic,” which insists that no concept can exist in isolation, but instead must be considered in the way it functions within capitalist structures, they suggest that this lens allows for an investigation of contradictory constructions of bodies within an ideological framework, and an exploration of intersecting embodiment that is simultaneously “discursive and material” (9). As Chivers and Markotić explain: “The ‘problem’ body stands for those bodily realities that—within shifting ideologies—represent the anomalies that contradict a normative understanding of physical being” (ibid.). Problem bodies are not only visibly, or invisibly, disabled; instead, the emphasis falls upon “the transformation of physical difference into cultural patterns of spectacle, patterns that replicate a range of pathologizing practices that oppress people” (ibid.). In this context, disability neither trumps other identity markers nor functions merely as an additive feature or characteristic, but becomes integral to thinking through some of the sharp criticisms of the visual representation in the film.

Disability theorists have long critiqued the way that disability has been culturally and medically constructed as a problem, but Chivers and Markotić embrace this figuration as a conceptual lens. This framework is particularly useful as a way of reading the multiple ways that Precious’s body becomes infused with meaning: “In particular, our objective is to define and reveal the ‘problem’ body as a multiplication of lived circumstances constructed both physically and socially, in order to call into question the ways that certain bodies more frequently invite the label ‘problem’ than do others” (10). Not only is Precious situated as a problem within the narrative, but critics also attempt to dismiss her story by constructing her as excessive—as a problem that should not be represented. Understanding Precious as a problem body allows readers and viewers to interpret her circumstances—from individual embodiment, to social context, to systemic forces—as always being in dynamic relationship.

Ultimately, I suggest that Precious offers important insight into the cultural tensions evoked when disability intersects with the already complex discourses of race, gender, and class. While the novel and the film do not openly position her as disabled, the knowledge claims she begins to make about “problem” embodiment, HIV-positive status, and mothering a child with a disability are, in effect, claims of disabled identity. To contextualize these positional insights, I draw from Tobin Siebers’s (2010) figurations of disability as a “social location

complexly embodied” (321). Siebers argues that disability identity provides unique insight into what he calls the “ideology of ability,” which, at its most insidious, functions as “the baseline by which humanness is determined” (318). He suggests that ability informs everything people do and hope for both individually and culturally; unless one lives beyond or outside its parameters, one is unable to see how this ideological system functions. In an effort to bring into sharper relief the cultural grasp of ability, he contrasts the limited cultural ideas about disability with the limitless ideas (dreams) about ability—both of which are shaped ideologically: “disability is essentially a ‘medical matter,’ while ability concerns natural gifts, talents, intelligence, creativity, physical prowess, imagination, dedication, the eagerness to strive, including the capacity and desire to strive—in brief, the essence of the human spirit” (ibid.). People with disabilities, people marked by physical anomaly or pathology, are uniquely situated to recognize the coercive nature of ability, and to share those insights. Because of their liminal social position, disability identity connects with other minority identities to critique dominant social formations. Drawing from theoretical traditions of intersectionality and standpoint, Siebers understands identity as “an epistemological construction that contains a broad array of theories about navigating social environments” (321).

Using these critical disability lenses, I consider several competing narratives emerging from Daniels’s film, all of which provide insights into the multilayered, embedded complexities of social oppression. First, this article traces the critical interpretations of the film that produce Precious and Sidibe as “problem bodies.” Second, using Sapphire’s novel and the film, I explore the ways that critical reactions to familial abuse displace a more productive exploration of the social and systemic critiques within the works. Third, I chart the unique sociocultural knowledge that Precious gains through pedagogical and relational support and her own complex embodiment. Fourth, the article considers “problem sexualities,” especially in relation to Precious’s diagnosis and understanding of HIV/AIDS. Finally, instead of celebrating Precious as an inspiration—a survivor, a heroine overcoming the odds—this article focuses on structural inequities and the personal, theoretical insight earned through the pain and positionality of a multilayered identity.

### The Problem Embodiment of Precious Jones

Sapphire’s *Push* has enjoyed critical success since its publication, but after the intense public acclaim of Daniels’s film, the visual embodiment of Precious Jones became indelibly tied to actress Gabourey Sidibe. This young actress, nominated for an Oscar award for her compelling portrayal, also became the undeserving scapegoat of some of the most virulent attacks against the film. This section considers some of the film’s mainstream critical commentary to highlight the ways by which the policing of Sidibe’s body has subverted engagement with the social

issues raised. As mentioned above, many critics argue that *Precious* rehashes dehumanizing racial stereotypes. One of the most scathing attacks was written by Armond White (2009), chief film critic of the *New York Press* and chairman of the New York Film Critics Circle. Known for his fiery rhetoric, White calls the film a “post-hip-hop freak show.” Referring to the shocking abuse and incest perpetrated by Precious’s parents and raising important issues about racialized stereotypes, such as the casting of lighter skinned, traditionally attractive actors in benevolent roles, he dismisses the film as a “sociological horror show.” White’s review could be useful in pushing audiences to consider how negative racial portrayals can be uncritically consumed in a white-dominant culture. Such images have the potential of reinforcing debasing assumptions about African American families; for example, about black men as rapists or black mothers as self-absorbed and even sadistic. In her discussions of the growing mass appeal of films written and directed by African Americans, bell hooks (1996) points out that filmmakers and viewers need to develop a new “aesthetics of looking” that takes the dehumanizing racialized history of the United States into account:

[N]ow that black filmmakers make films that they hope will have mass appeal, they address the huge white movie-going audience by providing them with familiar images of blackness. These images are usually stereotypical. Until both colonizer and colonized decolonize their minds, audiences in white supremacist cultures will have difficulty “seeing” and understanding images of blackness that do not conform to the stereotype. (90)

Viewers of *Precious* must take seriously the anxiety and distrust of African American critics and scholars, who argue that these depictions will only reinforce deeply embedded racist ideas about black family life, especially among white viewers. A critical aesthetics of looking suggests to viewers that altering the way we look at images is political, and reminds us to continually pay attention to the political stakes involved in the cultural discussions surrounding such films.

Although White’s (2009) critique of the film bears consideration, his aesthetics of looking defines the appropriate racial representation rather narrowly, and it pits disability, gender, and fat embodiment in opposition to racial respect. His blanket rejection of the film attempts to challenge the negative racialized stereotypes evoked by Precious Jones/Gabourey Sidibe, but in the process it reifies “fat” discrimination. He suggests that darker-skinned actors, including Sidibe, are scripted as “terrors”: “Sidibe herself is presented as an animal-like stereotype—she’s so obese her face seems bloated into a permanent pout. . . . Sidibe’s fancy-dressed daydream looks laughable; poorly photographed, its primary effect is pathetic.” His references to Sidibe’s body are meant to cement his case against the film; instead, these comments expose a troubling reductive thinking that equates positive and negative racial imagery to body size and (in) appropriate gendered self-expression.

In this move, White uses Sidibe's body size to illustrate the "pathetic" nature of the film, and he relies upon strong cultural rejection of obesity to make this equation work. By constructing Sidibe as a problem body, White avoids addressing the issues of abuse, neglect, and systemic failure the film attempts to narrate. Fat studies theorist Marilyn Wann (2009) argues that the terms "obese" and "obesity" position fatness as a medical category:

Calling fat people "obese" medicalizes human diversity. Medicalizing diversity inspires a misplaced search for a "cure" for naturally occurring difference. Far from generating sympathy for fat people, medicalization of weight fuels anti-fat prejudice and discrimination in all areas of society. . . . The pretense of concern for fat people's health wards anti-fat attitudes against exposure as simple hatred. . . . Medicalization actually helps categorize fat people as social untouchables. (xiii–xiv)

Critical disability studies understands the power of medicalization to de-politicize and individualize social issues. In this case, Sidibe's body size is used as evidence that the film is an implicitly negative portrayal.

Echoing White, many other critics flesh out arguments against the film through invasive readings of Sidibe's body. Anthony Lane (2009) of the *New Yorker* describes Precious (Sidibe) in degrading terms, suggesting that her weight produces a profound barrier to expression and communication: "She is grimly overweight, her face so filled out that the play of normal expression seems restricted; yet Sidibe does wonders with that sad limitation, and we learn to spot the flare of anger in her eyes." Her success as an actress, from this perspective, is achieved by *overcoming* her body, not by inhabiting it. Sidibe's visual presence stands in direct opposition to prevailing images of lead actresses in Hollywood, who fit a very narrow physical mold: predominantly white, young, ultra-thin, and (hetero)sexually desirable. And although all female actresses fall under the intense critical lens of an insatiable celebrity media, Sidibe's nonnormative body is often situated as the primary problem of the film. For example, critical fixation on her excess weight trumps the abuse, literacy, and economic issues faced by the protagonist in Daniel Engber's (2009) essay for *Slate* titled, tellingly, "How Did Precious Get So Fat?": "Lee Daniels's *Precious* provides a hellish tableau of petty theft, physical abuse, attempted infanticide, rape, incest, . . . welfare fraud, HIV/AIDS, homophobia, school violence, teen pregnancy, self-hatred, and illiteracy. But the most arresting figure of urban poverty is the one that lumbers through nearly every frame: The 300-pound Gabby Sidibe."

Reviewers seem compelled to call attention to Sidibe's weight, exposing their participation in a pervasive cultural discomfort with nonskinny bodies. *New York Magazine* reviewer David Edelstein (2009) describes Sidibe's "head [as] a balloon on the body of a zeppelin . . . her cheeks so inflated they squash her eyes into slits." Even a favorable review by Alison Hallett (2009) stresses

Sidibe's size: "And she's fat. (Euphemisms need not apply—the boldly cast Gabourey Sidibe doesn't have a 'pretty face,' nor is she 'curvy.' She's the fattest woman seen onscreen in a non-comedic role in recent memory)." Sadly, Hallett has a point. In a culture obsessed with thinness and at war with the obesity epidemic, fat bodies have been relegated to reality spectacles like *The Biggest Loser*, where participants can only stay in front of the camera if they pay their dues in the gym.

In the examples cited above, critics resist racial stereotypes by rejecting the body of Sidibe; in effect, however, their comments reinforce intensely negative stereotypes about large bodies and remobilize some of the very elements of objectification and dehumanization that the film sets out to condemn. Fiona Kumari Campbell's (2009) conceptualization of ableism is useful in parsing some of this cultural discomfort with the story/body of Precious. She conceives of ableism broadly, in a way that functions well with Chivers and Markotic's (2011) problem body and Siebers's (2010) ideology of ability. Campbell frames ableism as "a network of beliefs, processes and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human" (5). She argues that two crucial elements are essential to what she calls the "regimes of ableism": "the *notion of the normative* (and normate individual) and the enforcement of a *constitutional divide* between . . . naturalized humanity and the aberrant, the unthinkable . . . and therefore non-human" (6; emphasis in original).<sup>2</sup>

I am most interested in the "constitutional divide" and the "unthinkable" in regard to how Precious's body and story have been read and resisted. The extreme abuse and horrific circumstances of her life are unthinkable in the sense that they shock viewers with a perversity, violence, and cruelty that are excruciating to witness. Notably, however, Precious—and Sidibe—is depoliticized as an individualized body constructed as nonnormative. And the talented Sidibe, while convincing in this horrific role, becomes scripted by many critics as horrific herself. As an actress, she is reduced to her dark, expressionless face and fat body and thereby dismissed.

Ironically, as many critics reject the film on the basis of pathologizing representations of race, they participate in fat discrimination that often cuts along racial and economic lines. In his 2004 book *The Obesity Myth: Why America's Obsession with Weight Is Hazardous to Your Health*, Paul Campos argues that contrary to popular notions that poverty causes fatness, it would be more accurate to state that fatness causes poverty. In other words, because of the intensity of fat discrimination, fat people (especially women) have far fewer opportunities for economic advancement. Campos also examines the reported mortality rates of people at high levels of obesity and finds them grossly exaggerated and unfounded, which leads him to another aspect of racial and class dimensions of fat discrimination:



The disgust the thin upper classes feel for the fat lower classes has nothing to do with mortality statistics, and everything to do with feelings of moral superiority engendered in thin people by the sight of fat people. Precisely because Americans are so repressed about class issues, the disgust the (relatively) poor engender in the (relatively) rich must be projected onto some other distinguishing characteristic. (68)

Such disgust is evoked by the film when Precious's nonnormative weight becomes fully realized as spectacle. In this scene, Precious steals and then consumes a whole bucket of fried chicken on her way to school—an act often referenced by critics as further evidence of the debasement and irredeemable nature of the film. In many ways, however, critical repulsion reveals more about the cultural intolerance toward fatness (and the undisciplined eating habits that fatness implies) than it does about the film itself. Returning to Chivers and Markotić (2011), this representation of obesity plays upon “cultural patterns of spectacle” (9) and helps to expose embedded public perceptions linking poverty and obesity.

Mirroring this critical rejection, within the novel and the film, in response to familial abuse, professional indifference, and peer rejection, Precious internalizes a bodily self-loathing and opens the narrative with a sense of herself as worthless and stupid. However, the narrative resists a one-dimensional understanding of her complex embodiment, and early on viewers and readers witness the beginnings of self-awareness outside of normative discourses. The following scene in particular highlights a transformational moment when Precious begins to see how she has been constructed by her mother and the welfare system as a “problem,” and begins to claim a disability awareness of sorts as a means of defending her daughter Mongo—and herself. Mongo lives with her grandmother Toosie, but both Mongo and Precious are on Mary's welfare plan, so Toosie must bring her granddaughter to Mary's apartment when the social worker comes to visit.

At age 16, Precious has an ambivalent and conflicted relationship to Mongo, and most of her ideas about her daughter's potential and worth rely upon unsophisticated, ableist beliefs about Down syndrome. The diagnosis and the term “mongoloid” that Precious hears from one of the nurses after her daughter's birth become so monolithic in her mind that she refashions this whispered word as the infant's name: “Mongo sound Spanish don't it? Yeah, thas why I chose it, but what it is is short for Mongoloid Down Sinder, which is what she is; sometimes what I feel I is. I feel so stupid sometimes. So ugly, worth nuffin” (Sapphire 1996, 35). In this passage, Precious conceives of Down syndrome as static, but this is not simply an expression of disability prejudice or ableism; her daughter's diagnosis also provides an immediate and powerful metaphorical meaning about her own life and blighted potential. The ableist notions she has about Mongo are deeply tied to the hopelessness and powerlessness she experiences in her own life. By naming her daughter Mongo, Precious reifies this cultural reading

of disability as incurable and unchanging. Her daughter just doesn't *have* Down syndrome, she is "Mongoloid Down Sinder," and Precious foresees a hopeless future for both of them—as stupid, ugly, and worthless.

At the same time, the limiting meanings associated with this diagnosis provide Precious with a fledgling vocabulary to connect the medico-cultural assumptions about cognitive impairment to the negative social assumptions about her own worth. As she witnesses the way that Mongo is treated and demeaned, she recognizes how she also has always been treated as a problem body and positioned on the nonnormal, nonhuman side of a constitutional divide constructed by her parents and other adults in her world. In the film, viewers witness the first signs of Precious's consciousness of this connection with Mongo's situation in a scene staged by Mary for the social worker, Miss Turner. In order to secure her welfare check, Mary performs devotion to Precious and her granddaughter, holding Mongo on her lap as she lies to Miss Turner about looking for a job and Mongo's doctor visits. After the short visit, Mary shoves Mongo off her lap, calling her a "goddamn animal" for throwing her candy to the floor. When Precious picks it up for the child, Mary yells at her in the same way, "You so fuckin' stupid, just like her dumb ass!" Witnessing her mother's verbal abuse of Mongo evokes growing hostility in Precious and empowers her to recognize that Mongo is being degraded in the same way that she has been her entire life. She and Mongo are little more than objects to Mary—necessary as bodies counted by the welfare system, but otherwise worthless. In this moment, Precious begins to realize that she must be the one to protect her daughter and provide a counternarrative that affirms her worth.

This moment of insight for Precious comes from recognizing the history of her own suffering, and seeing this pattern begin again for her young daughter. Theorists supporting minority identity understand oppression and suffering as sites of epistemological import. Siebers (2010) suggests that "[s]uffering has a theoretical component because it draws attention to situations that jeopardize the future of the individual" (325). In this case, Precious's suffering allows her to feel her daughter's vulnerability and pushes her to stake a claim in protecting the child, even though she has never been protected herself.

### Systemic Oppression and the Making of Problem Bodies

Sapphire's novel and Daniels's film present many opportunities for systemic critiques of the larger forces of oppression working to trap Precious in a situation beyond her control. In mainstream discussions of the film, however, many structural injustices have been depoliticized and read instead as evidence of personal failure or triumph. This section challenges the limitations of individualized interpretations and explores the larger systemic elements at work in three specific locations: Precious's family life, the educational system, and her interaction with health and social-services professionals.

The most pressing and debilitating issue facing Precious at the opening of the narrative is her father's sexual abuse; not only is she living in a constant state of emotional trauma, but she is pregnant. Precious is also illiterate, and her "learning disabilities" (I use this term not to reference a specific diagnosis, but to underscore the disabling effect of her illiteracy) are deeply intertwined with the long-standing abuse she has endured and the appalling indifference toward her demonstrated by teachers and other adults throughout her life. Situated in 1980s Harlem, the film opens in math class, where Precious is called out by the school's principal, Ms. Lichenstein. During this interview, the audience learns that Precious is 16 years old, pregnant with her second child, and still in junior high school. The principal says she wants to help, but her questions are accusatory and invasive, and ultimately Precious is suspended. Sapphire's *Push* (1996) opens with the same scene, but with Precious as narrator, the novel provides more historical context for her situation:

I was left back when I was twelve because I had a baby for my fahver. That was in 1983. I was out of school for a year. This gonna be my second baby. My daughter got Down Sinder. She's retarded. I had got left back in the second grade too, when I was seven, 'cause I couldn't read (and I still peed on myself). I should be in the eleventh grade. . . . But I'm not. I'm in the ninfe grade. (3)

Thus readers understand immediately how her father's ongoing abuse has shaped her life: she has been emotionally betrayed in every way imaginable; forced into motherhood (twice) by age 16; and has paid dearly by having her own education stunted.

Issues of abuse form the foundation of the narrative, and breaking the silence on sexual and emotional abuse provided the crucial motivation for many of the big-name personalities to involve themselves in the film. Tyler Perry and Oprah Winfrey joined forces as executive producers. Winfrey, well known for publicly sharing her experiences of abuse, lent her substantial clout to promote the film. Perry (2009), as a personal way of promoting the film to fans on his website, recounted intimate details of his own childhood abuse, including regular beatings by his father and an ammonia bath by his grandmother. Mo'Nique publicly connected Precious's story to her own abuse in an interview, when asked about finding inspiration for the role of Mary: "Well, I know that character. That character was my oldest brother Gerald, to me" (Polowy 2009).

At the same time, many African American scholars and critics denounced Oprah, Perry, and the film for pandering to white audiences through racial self-hatred. Author Ishmael Reed (2010) wrote in a review for the *New York Times* that he felt "under psychological assault" for the duration of *Precious*, and argued that such films "cast collective shame upon an entire community" in ways that films about similarly dysfunctional white families do not. Sapphire (2010) responded in an editorial to Reed's review by reiterating her belief that such stories need to be told:

In the 13 years since my novel *Push* was published, I have talked to thousands of women who have been sexually abused, some of whom have had experiences that make what happened in *Push* . . . look like a walk in the park. . . . I would like to see black males less defensive and more courageous in their investigations of sexual abuse in the black community. I would like to see more, not less, written about rape by African-Americans.

In this exchange, race dignity and sexual violence/gender issues are pitted against each other, and an unnecessary binary is set up between resisting racism and challenging destructive silences.

Sapphire's narrative is undeniably extreme, and Reed rightly points out the myriad stereotypes that Precious's dysfunctional family evokes. However, extreme abuse exists across racial lines, and a film like this provides a productive space to talk within and beyond racial identities in an effort to deepen a collective aesthetics of looking. Evelyn M. Hammonds (1999) provides instructive advice about thinking through racially informed silences. She traces the historical pathologization of black female sexuality—as hypersexual, immoral, and impure—to point out how this embedded, white-dominated cultural understanding promotes an ongoing silence among black women about their own experiences. While Hammonds's well-known work focuses on creating a space to articulate nonheterosexual desire and pleasure, her critique of systemic silence is applicable to conversations about sexual violence and abuse as well. As she argues: "This production of *silence* instead of *speech* is an effect of the institutions . . . which are engaged in the commodification of Otherness" (100; emphasis in original). Hammonds refers specifically here to academic institutions, but we can extrapolate this to point out that Reed and other critics using the institution of mainstream media to reject the film are producing silence instead of speech about sexual violence in African American families—and in families of all racial and ethnic backgrounds.

At the same time, while publicly breaking the silence about domestic violence and sexual abuse should be recognized as courageous, the individualized stories of Oprah, Tyler Perry, and Mo'Nique continue to position the problem as personal rather than systemic. In taking on so many taboo subjects that call forth racialized stereotypes, this film provides a powerful context for publicly addressing these historical constructs. In many ways, these celebrity personalities could have pushed the conversation beyond abuse and survival into a cultural conversation about how racialized assumptions enforce silence around these issues. With their large white audiences, Oprah and Perry could have fostered a more productive conversation about the dangers of "commodifying" Precious and her family as racial pathology. Breaking the silence opens a conversation, but white audiences who empathize with Precious about abuse should also engage critically with the racial implications of her story.

Beyond the context of the family, the novel and the film explore systemic failures in education and social services that are often downplayed by supporters of the film who want to celebrate Precious's personal overcoming narrative. I wish to call attention to these structural forces, because they highlight the interplay of poverty, race, and disability as material oppression in Precious's life. In Sapphire's novel, readers realize early on that over the span of her short life, there have been key moments when adults outside her family should have taken deliberate action to intervene. In many ways, the trauma of sexual abuse, which started before she entered school, was written on her body. As a grade-schooler, part of the way she expressed this trauma was to remain immobile in her desk, even to the point of wetting herself. Instead of investigating this with compassion, school officials saw her as a problem child, unwilling to behave. At age 12, at the hospital giving birth to her daughter, Precious confides in a nurse that her own father also fathered her child. The nurse calls the police, but when Precious remains silent nothing more is done on her behalf. These moments are not about the tragedy of Precious's abuse, but are blatant examples of the ways social systems designed to protect and sustain Precious fail to even see her.

The educational failure goes beyond an indifference to her obvious emotional distress. The fact that Precious has progressed from grade to grade though remained functionally illiterate should be read as an indictment against the educational system as a whole. In a recent essay exploring the intersectional dynamics of race, class, gender, and disability, Nirmala Erevelles and Andrea Minear (2010) trace the tragic educational story of a young African American girl named Cassie Smith who was identified as functionally illiterate at age 12. Cassie's story reveals how multiple disability labels were used to justify changing schools, and to segregate and exclude her from her peers throughout her educational history. Erevelles and Minear suggest that the confluences of disability, lower economic class, race, and gender worked insidiously to allow professionals to construct Cassie (to treat her) as not only a "problem body," but as a "dispensable" one (142).

The story of Cassie serves as a reminder of the innumerable real stories of educational neglect embedded in the fictional narrative of Precious. Although the main thrust of *Push* and *Precious* is to highlight the success of alternative education, the novel and the film also actively condemn the system that has allowed Precious to remain functionally illiterate. Notably, even before entering the alternative school Each One Teach One, she understands that the public school system constructs her as inferior and incapable—as disabled. After taking an aptitude test to enter the new school, Precious articulates a sense of futility about her position within the educational system: "There has always been something wrong wif the tesses. The tesses paint a picture of me wif no brain." Such tests depict her entire family as "more than dumb"; they render them all "invisible" (Sapphire 1996, 30). She also suspects that the pieces of her life listed in her official file—her academic record, her daddy, Mongo, her weight—construct

her as a parasite, a vampire: “I know who they say I am—vampire sucking the system’s blood. Ugly black grease to be wipe away, punish, kilt, changed, fined a job for. I wanna say I am somebody. . . . I see the pink faces in suits look over top of my head. I watch myself disappear in their eyes, their tesses. I talk loud but still I don’t exist” (31). This early articulation of how her body and mind have been misread demonstrates an emerging defiance against oppression, but also reveals a palpable resignation about how the educational system works.

Precious’s growth and empowerment are directly linked to her entrance into the alternative school, where her teacher, Ms. Rain, finally addresses her illiteracy. This is not simply an inspiring story about how learning to read can change a person’s life, as Barbara Bush said in a 2009 National Public Radio story supporting the film. Ms. Rain actively engages in a Freirean approach, where literacy learning is tied intimately to understanding the forces of oppression operating in one’s life. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire ([1970]2003) famously contrasts the oppressive “banking” system of education with the empowering “problem-posing” process (71–86). The banking system reifies power hierarchies by treating students as passive objects and teachers as subjects who deposit knowledge. In a problem-posing model, teachers and students collaborate in a process of critical thinking about their own situations in the world and the means to transform them. In this process, students “come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation” (83). The transformational quality of this collaborative learning model is starkly portrayed through Precious.

Another important systemic critique culminates toward the end of the film, but calls attention to the material conflicts between Precious’s goals and the systems supposedly set up to help her pursue them. After the birth of her son, named Abdul, Precious consults with a social worker to establish her own resources, independent of her mother. Ms. Weiss, memorably played by Mariah Carey, works with Precious, but as she learns more about her client’s situation seems to be more disgusted by than sympathetic to it. As Precious learns to read and gains confidence, she decides to see for herself where she stands in the social worker’s eyes, so when the opportunity arises she steals her file from Ms. Weiss. Precious has always intuitively mistrusted the “power” of her file, and in this act of reclamation she is finally able to uncover how the social worker and the welfare system function as agents in her oppression. Many of the words in the file are difficult for Precious, so she calls Jermaine, a friend from class, to help her decipher Ms. Weiss’s notes. Ms. Weiss acknowledges Precious’s literacy gains, but, citing Precious’s low aptitude-test scores, thinks Each One Teach One focuses too much on language acquisition and not enough on workforce training:

Precious is capable of going to work now. . . . In keeping with the benefit from any of the various workfare programs in existence. Despite her obvious intellectual limitations she is quite capable of working as a home attendant. . . .

My rapport with Precious is minimal. . . . The client seems to view the social service system and its proponents as her enemies, and yet, while she mentions independent living, seems to envision social services, AFDC, as taking care of her forever. (Sapphire 1996, 119–20)

Ms. Weiss does not support Precious's goal of getting her GED and working toward college, because she thinks such resources would be wasted on her. Erevelles and Minear situate disability as the "organizing ideological force" (2010, 142) deployed in their narrative of Cassie, and this framing is useful to describe Ms. Weiss's reading of Precious. Her "intellectual limitations" are evoked in order to justify the system's disinvestment in her education and her future.

As Precious discusses this with her friends, they are well aware of the way the system dehumanizes them. Working as a home attendant would sabotage Precious's plan to continue school and provide for Abdul (and Mongo). In support of Precious's outrage, her friend Rhonda recalls her own former situation working as a home attendant for a white woman in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn. She was paid for eight hours of work, but remained on call (Sapphire 1996, 121) twenty-four hours a day, six days a week. In effect, Rhonda was paid just over a dollar an hour and kept from home all but one day a week. The young women also discuss the fact that workfare programs insidiously displace other paid workers (usually people of color) by exploiting ostensibly free client labor. As Jermaine succinctly says, "If all they wanna do is place us in slave labor shits and we want to keep going to school, then that means they have a different agenda from us" (122). Precious and her friends support one another to define their own agendas, knowing they will also have to fight against powerful forces to follow the paths they map out for themselves.

According to the system and Ms. Weiss, Precious has been "rehabilitated" enough to begin working, even if it means that she will always be relegated to low-level and low-paying jobs. In a reading of the film and the novel, this move on Ms. Weiss's part should be underscored as a systemic strategy to use disability as a means of enforcing and perpetuating economic, racial, and gender inequities. Critical class analysis is avoided when we use pathology instead of inequality to talk about these differences in human value, investment, and social support.

### **Transformative Pedagogies and Intersectional Knowledge**

The educational context of *Each One Teach One* provides a completely new way of seeing the world, one that allows Precious to claim her own experience as theoretical knowledge. From the beginning, the classroom environment Precious encounters strikes her as different. Ms. Rain has the six young women in the class form a circle and introduce themselves. She stresses participation and understands that their willingness to assist one another and ask for help is part

of collaborative learning. Ms. Rain begins with the alphabet, and as some of the girls struggle with the order of the letters, she says simply, “We [are] all in this together” (51), setting the tone for an egalitarian environment.

This first day is auspicious for Precious. Even before meeting the other students she forces herself to sit in the front of the room, instead of hiding in the back. For Precious, this represents a risk (and choice) to be seen, and in a context of collective learning Ms. Rain and her classmates *do* see her—which opens a wellspring of emotion. By the time Ms. Rain asks her if she thinks she is in the right class, she cries silently though she is “not sad or embarrass” (48), but only feeling for the first time like she belongs somewhere. The film captures this moment, with Precious divulging after a brief introduction that she has never spoken in class before. Ms. Rain asks how that makes her feel, to which she responds: “I feel here.” The transformation that begins for Precious—of becoming present to her life—illustrates how starved she has been for kindness and attention. While it takes time for the young women in the class to become friends, Ms. Rain lays the groundwork for a collaborative space, where each student is valued and encouraged to develop her own voice.

These ideals are not ancillary to a problem-posing learning process, but are at its very core. Paulo Freire considered collaborative learning to be a humanizing process: “This movement of inquiry must be directed towards humanization. . . . The pursuit of full humanity, however, cannot be carried out in isolation or individualism, but only in fellowship and solidarity” ([1970]2003, 85). When Precious enters Each One Teach One, she has been oppressed and dehumanized in every possible way, and while her journey toward literacy demands individual commitment, she begins immediately to draw strength from Ms. Rain and her student peers. After a month of school, Precious articulates this new feeling through a recognition of loneliness: “I go home. I’m so lonely there. I never notice before. . . . So much pain, shame—I never feel the loneliness. . . . But now since I been going to school I feel lonely. Now since I sit in circle I realize all my life I been outside of circle” (Sapphire 1996, 62). Before entering the alternative school Precious had never felt included or valued. But her newly developing relationships provide a different context from which to view her life—especially the intolerable nature of her home life with Mary Jones.

The key component of the learning process in Ms. Rain’s class is a personal journal the students write in every day. From the beginning, when many of them are still struggling with the basics of language, Ms. Rain tells them to write—regardless of spelling or grammar: “Write what’s on your mind, push yourself to see the letters that represent the words you’re thinking” (61). Ms. Rain asks them to explain the words she cannot make out, writes them out correctly so that they can see their own words, then responds back to them. Within this process, all of the young women in the class become makers of knowledge, not just recipients. The ongoing personal dialogue helps Precious become literate and also infuses her story with value. Her journal entries contain details of the



world she knows: her daughter, her abusive parents, and her uncertain future with a new baby. Ms. Rain treats Precious's writing with straightforward respect, but also deals with the legitimate issues and risks facing Precious and her peers. When she finds out, for example, that Precious has not seen a doctor during her pregnancy, Ms. Rain lectures the whole class on prenatal care. As Precious describes it: "Miz Rain fall out, I mean she fall *out!* When she finded out I ain' been to doctor. *PRENATAL! PRENATAL!*" (63; emphasis in original). Ms. Rain and the other girls in the class admonish Precious, but not in a way that reinforces what she has always been told—that she is stupid—but lovingly, as a surrogate family, determined to teach her how to survive.

In a nonhierarchical environment, Ms. Rain expresses emotion in response to the issues and injustices faced by Precious and the other students; she does not use professionalism as an excuse for indifference. In many ways, Ms. Rain takes on the role of what Patricia Hill Collins ([1990]2000) calls an "othermother" in her relationships with her students. Collins describes the othermother tradition in African American communities as a way that women—with and without children of their own—have taken care of one another and one another's children: "Nurturing children in Black extended family networks stimulates a more generalized ethic of caring and personal accountability among African-American women who often feel accountable to all the Black community's children" (189). Collins also discusses the uniquely empowering othermother relationships that develop between African American woman teachers and their female students, when teachers engage in the radical work of encouraging self-realization in the classroom. She refers to this familial, activist teaching strategy as "mothering the mind" (190), an apt description of the nurturing relationship that emerges between Ms. Rain and Precious.

The presence of Ms. Rain as othermother, coupled with the woman-centered support that emerges between Precious and her classmates, provides essential strength to Precious, especially after giving birth to her second baby, Abdul. During her stay in the hospital she continues her journal with Ms. Rain, who asks pointed, compassionate questions about how she is going to take care of herself and her son. Precious focuses on wanting to be a good mother, but Ms. Rain focuses on Precious taking care of herself—namely, continuing to learn to read, to obtain her GED, to potentially go to college. This ongoing conversation allows Precious to express her determination to keep her children and to think realistically about the challenges she will face as a mother. Ms. Rain even encourages Precious to consider the hated perspective of a social worker who suggests she consider putting her children up for adoption: "Being a good mother might mean letting your baby be raised by someone who is better able than you to meet the child's needs" (Sapphire 1996, 72). Precious defiantly writes, "I is be bt meet cldls ed," which Ms. Rain translates as "I is best able to meet my child's need" (*ibid.*). Although Precious is upset, because she respects and trusts her teacher, she engages in the conversation and realizes

above all that her ability to take care of Abdul will depend upon her ability to take care of herself.

As she progresses, moves out of her mother's apartment, and takes on the challenges of mothering Abdul, Precious matures in important ways. Both the novel and the film also stress that her self-awareness is enhanced by a culturally relevant curriculum. Exposure to prominent African American figures, such as Malcolm X, Harriet Tubman, and Alice Walker, and her growing relationships with her peers and Ms. Rain push Precious to rethink some of her own prejudices—especially regarding sexuality, racial divisions, drug addiction, and HIV. Prior to entering *Each One Teach One*, Precious draws many of her opinions from Louis Farrakhan, who provides her with a vocabulary for race pride, but also fills her mind with simplistic prejudices against “crack addicts and crackers” (34). As she learns to read, one of the most influential works for Precious is Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. Precious recognizes her own experience of abuse in Celie's story, but tries to reject this connection by talking about what “Farrakhan got to say about butches” (81). Ms. Rain informs Precious that she is homosexual herself and challenges her prejudice: “Ms. Rain say homos not who rape me, not homos who let me sit up not learn for sixteen years” (ibid.). In the novel, this brief interchange signifies a rupture in Precious's worldview—one that is further expanded when she is forced to grapple with her own HIV diagnosis.

### Redemption, HIV, and Disability Epistemology

The pathological sexual deviance of Precious's father comes again to center stage when she finds out he has died of AIDS. Her mother brings her this news just as Precious begins to consider the possibility of earning her GED and pursuing higher education and training for a job she wants. After being tested, she finds out that Abdul does not have the virus though she does. This comes as a tremendous blow to Precious, who feels that her father has now stolen everything from her—her childhood, her sexuality, her life. But her story does not end there; HIV becomes another heavy reality that Precious must learn to inhabit, accept, and transform in whatever way possible. To many critics of Sapphire's book and Daniel's film, the HIV diagnosis represents the final straw in a long list of horrors. Reed (2010) captures the sentiment shared by many reviewers of the film in this final rebuff: “By the movie's end, Precious may be pushing toward literacy. But she is jobless, saddled with two children, one of whom has Down syndrome, and she's learned that she has AIDS. Some redemption.” This list captures some of the facts of her life, but none of the resources she has to draw upon. Precious does not have a job because she is determined to focus on her education in order to gain employment options. Moreover, her movement toward literacy needs to be understood as relational; even the most devastating challenges she faces become bearable with the circle of support she has developed with Ms. Rain and her classmates/friends.

Reed's rather flippant dismissal of the film, like similarly negative reviews focusing on excesses of embodiment, starkly reflects an ideology of ableism. For Reed, Mongo's disability and Precious's HIV diagnosis supplant any redemptive possibility within the film. Drawing upon the work of John Nguyet Erni, Robert McRuer (2002) describes two cultural fantasies through which disability and HIV/AIDS are understood: "the fantasy of morbidity and the fantasy of control and containment" (228). The fantasy of morbidity positions people with HIV/AIDS as already dead, and Reed's comments reflect this cultural reading. On the other side, the fantasy of control and containment views a cure as the only rational approach to managing AIDS. However, as McRuer points out, by privileging the discourse of a cure, conversations about the material realities of AIDS are suppressed:

conversations about how HIV positive and HIV negative, disabled and non-disabled, people are all implicated in the epidemic and the systems of power that sustain it, about how people with AIDS are not passive observers who are simply waiting for a cure, and important conversations about the range of sexual and drug-using practices individuals and communities . . . engage in. (231)

From this perspective, it becomes important to view Precious's diagnosis as another aspect of her complex embodiment, not as a death sentence. Precious's identity status as HIV positive and as a mother of a disabled child, while obviously difficult, becomes central to how she understands her reality and confronts her world. In addition to participating in the cultural conversations outlined by McRuer, Sapphire explicitly wanted the novel to be part of a larger dialogue about sexual abuse, violence, and the heavy burden that HIV/AIDS was having on African American communities—especially on women.

Indeed, the novel and the film offer an important platform to explore the persistent disproportionate spread of HIV/AIDS within African American communities. In 1990, while African American women accounted for only 13 percent of the female population in the United States, they represented 30 percent of all new cases of HIV/AIDS among women; by 2005, this proportion had increased to 66 percent (Bomtempi, Eng, and Quinn 2008, 64). HIV infections among African Americans overall have been roughly stable since the 1990s, but it should be underscored that while black people represent only 12 percent of the population, they represent 46 percent of people living with HIV and 45 percent of new infections each year. To put this into even greater relief, approximately one in sixteen African American men and one in thirty African American women will be diagnosed with HIV in their lifetimes. This rate for African American men is six times higher than for white men; for black women, the HIV incidence rate is fifteen times higher than for white women (CDC 2011).

While Precious is unquestionably a victim of rape and incest, Sapphire goes to pains to move beyond a cultural narrative of HIV that divides those who engage in risky behaviors and those who, like Precious, can be cast as innocents and therefore more tragic, or blameless, victims. Certainly Precious's father should be judged as immoral and criminal in his treatment of Precious, but his behavior and her victimization should not devolve into counterproductive discussions about deserving and undeserving victims of disease. Precious's own evolving ideas about HIV provide an excellent background to explore multiple competing cultural narratives surrounding the disease. In the early weeks of her diagnosis, she has very narrow and stigmatizing ideas about HIV: "I cannot see how I am the same as a white faggit [*sic*] or crack addict" (Sapphire 1996, 109). Her friend Rita challenges these misconceptions. Rita is a recovering crack addict, and her boyfriend, who is white, is also HIV positive. Rita knows many people with HIV and AIDS, and even dreams of opening a safe house for single mothers who are HIV positive. Just as Ms. Rain challenges Precious's prejudices against homosexuals, Rita challenges her not to perceive the disease as some kind of divine punishment, but simply as a difficult reality that many people have to face: "All people with HIV and AIDS is innocent victims; it's a disease, not a 'good,' a 'bad'" (ibid.).

Understanding that she is part of a wider community of people struggling with the disease becomes crucial for her coming to terms with her diagnosis. Developing community within pain allows her to access insight from her complex embodiment, as evidenced by a transformative experience she has attending her first incest-survivor group. She hears devastating stories from all kinds of women—"[g]irls, old women, white women, lotta white women" (130)—women she believed to be safe from the kind of abuse she had endured. She is struck not only by the fact that rich, white women could share her experience, but that all the women in the group could hear her story with respect and compassion. She wonders to herself as she chats with some of the women in a coffee shop after the meeting: "How Mama and Daddy know me sixteen years and hate me, how a stranger meet me and love me" (131). These moments of connection, of being heard and seen for her strength and insight, are intensely life-affirming, even in the face of a life-changing diagnosis.

Being a mother also helps Precious move beyond despair after her diagnosis. Relieved that neither Mongo nor Abdul contracted the disease, she wants to provide for and protect them in ways that her parents never did for her. As she becomes increasingly successful with Abdul, she asks the social workers about gaining custody of Mongo, only to discover that she has been placed in an institution. The case workers tell Precious that Toosie was not giving Mongo what she needed, and that her daughter was "severely retarded" and now in "really bad shape" (85). Not surprisingly, the social-work professionals do not share Precious's growing confidence in herself as a mother: "They say even if

she could be help, take a lot more than me to help, and ain't I got full load with Abdul" (ibid.). Actually gaining custody of Mongo after she has become a ward of the state would be an uphill battle for Precious, and Sapphire leaves this issue unresolved. In the film, Daniels changes Mongo's fate rather dramatically: she is never put in an institution and, in the final scene, is triumphantly reclaimed by her mother.

Although the film and the novel differ, both tie Precious's maturing development to her relationship with Mongo. In many ways, Mongo's disability, her lack of support, and the negative assumptions about her abilities—by Mary, the social workers, Toosie—all function to mirror Precious's own life prior to *Each One Teach One*. As Precious begins to fight for herself she is also fighting for her children, and in Mongo's case, she has to work against the systemic devaluing of her daughter's life. Of course, this is precisely the battle that Precious must wage for herself. Throughout her life, she has been viewed by teachers as unteachable, by her own mother as an "animal," as "retarded" (59), and by other professionals as a problem for other reasons—for wetting herself, for getting pregnant, for indifference or disrespect. In many ways, her story is an attempt to make visible what all of these authority figures failed to witness or address. By recognizing the complex and intersecting ways she has been constructed as a problem body, Precious gains a crucial awareness about claiming disability and its epistemological power. Her HIV diagnosis, her large body, and her long history of being situated as learning-disabled, combined with her racial and class identities, provide her with unique insights into the structural powers that have worked to oppress her.

## Conclusion

The intense, wide-ranging critical and popular reactions to Daniels's film provide a compelling backdrop to a discussion of the intersecting ambivalence regarding race, sexuality, sexual abuse, disability, and class—in the film, the novel, and the U.S. cultural imaginary. In the popular media, critical support and rejection of the film have been primarily articulated around racial representation: namely, addressing silences around sexual abuse versus reifying degrading racial images and stereotypes. These issues are foundational to a cultural analysis of the film, but at the same time, disability studies offers additional and valuable perspectives and challenges readers and viewers to consider both how disability is represented—in terms of Mongo, Precious's learning difficulties, and HIV—as well as the ways that discourses of disability—in terms of aberrant, pathological, and excessive bodies—are exploited to contain the cultural conversations, especially concerning race and abuse. The discourse generated about the film, and especially regarding the body of Sidibe, provides compelling terrain to explore how disability rhetoric is often employed uncritically to shift the terms of discussion. Positioning disability as integral to both the

challenges Precious faces, as well as the resources she draws upon, adds richness and complexity to an understanding of Sapphire's novel, Daniels's film, and an ongoing cultural anxiety about identifying and honestly addressing personal and systemic forces of oppression.

The story of Precious is one of process, relationship, and growing resourcefulness, not one of inspirational arrival. The familial network that develops between the young women at Each One Teach One provides foundational support for Precious and her peers, who all need sisters in their corners giving them strength to persevere. As these young women gain literacy under Ms. Rain's guidance, they also understand how important continuing education will be to their long-term independence from social services. Returning to Freire ([1970]2003), a liberating education "posits as fundamental that the people subjected to domination must fight for their emancipation" (86). Although many of these young women rely upon welfare and other social-service programs for survival, they also realize that they must somehow liberate themselves from the oppressive grip of a system designed to exploit them as cheap labor by sacrificing their dreams and human potential. By the end of the novel and the film Precious has not solved this dilemma, but she has identified and confronted her most immediate oppressors; she has built a network of friends, mentors, and distinct communities of support—her friends at Each One Teach One and groups of other young women diagnosed with HIV and incest survivors; and she has tenaciously claimed a complex though not impossible vision of herself obtaining her GED, going on to college or vocational education to prepare for a profession, and mothering the children who were forced upon her in a way that will rewrite the childhood she endured.

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## Note

1. I place "obesity" in quotation marks to highlight the medicalized and contested nature of the term, especially by scholars in fat studies. Although quotations marks have been removed in subsequent uses of the term in accordance with the journal's style guidelines, these quotes should be inferred throughout.

2. Campbell references "normate," a well-established term in the field of disability studies. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (1997) coined this term in her book *Extraordinary*

*Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. Garland Thomson uses “normate” as an analytical lens to explore the social and cultural privilege of specific bodies and minds, and to integrate disability into cultural discussions around race/ethnicity, gender, class, and other historical identity markers.

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