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Interpreting Disability Metaphor and Race in Octavia Butler's "The Evening and the Morning and the Night"

As one of the most successful and prolific black science-fiction writers of her generation and as a writer who consistently represented a racially diverse range of characters, Octavia E. Butler is often read as a "race writer par excellence" (Lavender 67). Butler herself, however, repeatedly insisted in her writing, speeches, interviews, and personal papers that she and her work could not and should not be read primarily or exclusively through the lens of race. She expressed great frustration that stories about black people were perceived as always being about race and racism rather than about people for whom racism was just one of many issues in their lives. This sentiment is particularly clear in Butler's letters to fellow authors as she solicited submissions for a never-published anthology tentatively titled *Black Futures*. In a letter to a potential contributor, Butler writes, "Too many of the stories we've gone through are stories of racism rather than stories about Black people. Of course, racism is a facet of Black life, but it isn't the whole. Our emphasis is on people" ("OEB 954"). Throughout her career Butler sought to create—and encouraged others to create—complex representations of black people and other people of color with attention to gender, class, sexuality, disability, and more. As she wrote in the draft of an essay: "I want to portray human variety . . . [and] I want to do it without lecturing or resorting to stereotypes" ("OEB 2390"). Butler's commitment to diverse representations manifests itself throughout her body of work as well as in her personal papers at the Huntington Library, which contain extensive research files she kept under categories such as "Women," "Black People," "Latinos," "Minorities," "Handicaps," and "Social Conditions" (Russell 372-75).

Butler's short story "The Evening and the Morning and the Night" represents a rarity in her oeuvre because most of the characters are never racially identified.¹ The story is narrated from the first-person perspective of Lynn Mortimer, a young woman with Duryea-Gode disease (DGD).² DGD is a disease Butler created for the story that, for most people, leads to "drifting," a condition in which individuals feel trapped inside of their bodies and do self-harm by digging at their skin and eyes as they attempt to "get out." Occasionally, while drifting, people with DGD (Butler often calls them "DGDs") also do harm to others. Lynn, the daughter of two parents with DGD, also referred to as a "double DGD," provides readers information about her experiences living with the disease and about her current life as a college student. The plot unfolds around Lynn's visit with her boyfriend, Alan, to Dilg, a well-known, well-funded DGD retreat or care facility. While there, Lynn learns that, as a double-DGD female, she exudes a pheromone that allows people with DGD who have drifted to remain effectively in control, free of self-destructive desires, and able to work, build, invent, and create. Seeing the possibility of life at Dilg, Lynn and Alan both then find themselves with the most hope for a future they've ever experienced, yet neither sees such a future as completely desirable.

After its initial publication in *Omni* magazine in 1987, "The Evening and the Morning and the Night" appeared in *The Year's Best Science Fiction: Fifth Annual Edition*

in 1988, in *Callaloo* in 1991, and in Butler's short-story collection *Bloodchild and Other Stories* in 1995.³ The story has since been reprinted in a number of anthologies. Despite its repeated publication, very few articles or book chapters have focused on this short story, although several scholars have included brief or moderately lengthy discussions of it within more extended arguments about Butler's work. Generally, scholars have focused their analyses of the story on issues of human agency, particularly in regard to biological predisposition,⁴ or on how Butler represents the possibility of hope in a seemingly dire or impossible situation.⁵ Recently, Isiah Lavender III has argued for reading the representation of DGD "as a literalized metaphor for race" (65). He writes that while "there is no specific textual detail, like a quotation, that bolsters the idea that DGD is a racial metaphor . . . bits of tangential evidence indicate that we can read the story this way, *even if these bits are inconclusive and speak to other kinds of oppression*" (68; added emphasis). Lavender's recent approach to the story reifies the tendency to interpret Butler primarily or exclusively through the lens of race even when multiple kinds of oppression are depicted or suggested. Such readings reduce and ignore not only the complexity of the work, but also the complexity of oppression. In approaching work by black writers, it is important to consider both the intersectional identities of the writer—here Butler as a working-class black woman with dyslexia—and the mutually constitutive nature of oppressions.⁶

I argue that in "Evening" DGD serves as a disability metaphor that demonstrates how ableism and antiblack racism operate in parallel and overlapping ways. In doing so, I am not claiming disability is the true singular analytic for the text, but rather insisting that we must understand disability as one of multiple major analytics through which to interpret this story. Further, I use my analysis of "Evening" to ground two larger arguments about nuancing approaches to disability metaphors and expanding the boundaries of the concept of disability, each of which supports the further development of black disability studies theories and methods. In what follows, I first explain each of these two larger interventions to provide theoretical frameworks before delving into my close reading of "Evening" and its representation of DGD as a disability metaphor.

Disability Metaphors and Defining Disability in Black Disability Studies

Disability metaphors are representations of disability that can be interpreted as representing something other than the lived experiences of people with disabilities, such as loss or evil.⁷ Disability studies scholars have often criticized disability metaphors, in both creative texts that employ them and even more so in scholarly work that fails to read representations of disability as anything other than metaphorical. Some disability studies scholars argue that disability metaphors reduce or erase the lives of people with disabilities.⁸ Lennard J. Davis argues that the preponderance of disability metaphors stems from an ableist culture that has conditioned people to be distracted by disability in a narrative not explicitly about disability. As a result, in narrative, "disability can't just *be*—it has to *mean* something. It has to signify" (37; original emphasis). A disabled character in a text not explicitly about disability is, therefore, often read as a metaphor for something unrelated to disability, such as when we read Richard III's hunchback as symbolic of his evil interiority or the fallen nation.⁹ While disabled characters are the most often-discussed examples of disability metaphors, plot events, settings, language choices, and imagery in a text that utilize the concept of disability can also be interpreted as disability metaphors, such as the institutions that appear in "Evening." Disability metaphors differ from ableist metaphors (colloquial phrases that use disability as an inherently negative

state of being, such as “turn a deaf ear”) as well as from oppression analogies (statements that compare and contrast experiences of oppression, such as “being black is like being disabled” or “marriage is a form a slavery”).¹⁰ I differentiate disability metaphors from these other terms because disability metaphors tend to be more extended and central to a text’s meanings than ableist metaphors and oppression analogies, which are more likely to involve brief statements or phrases.

More recently, some disability studies scholars, particularly those studying disability in texts by writers of color and writers from postcolonial contexts, have argued for more nuanced approaches to disability metaphors, insisting that disability can take on both concrete and metaphoric meanings in a text.¹¹ This approach to disability metaphors seeks to understand how these representations of disability can symbolize something other than disability while still being about disability. Clare Barker, for example, discusses how the representation of disabled children in post-colonial fiction can serve as a “straightforward symbol” of the damage colonialism does to the colony while also representing the material realities of disabled colonized people (2-3). Disability metaphors therefore allow us to explore the historical and material connections between disability and other social systems of privilege and oppression such as race, gender, sexuality, class, the nation, and more. Such metaphors need not be either/or (*i.e.*, this representation is either about race or about disability); in fact, they are often both/and, due specifically to the mutually constitutive nature of oppressions.

This approach to the multiple symbolic resonances of disability metaphors proves particularly useful in the context of work by African Americans. In this case, one must consider how histories of oppression have included both the production of disability through violence, such as the disabled bodies created in the context of slavery,¹² and the use of discourses of disability to justify discrimination and exclusion, as in such concepts as feeble-mindedness or *dysaesthesia aethiopica*, a supposed African American-specific illness resulting in laziness.¹³ With African American writers and artists it is important that black disability studies scholarship consider how disability’s intimate historical relationship to antiblack racism layers African American use of disability metaphors with multiple meanings. That is, because discourses of disability have been used in the name of antiblack racism and because antiblack racism can produce disabling circumstances for black people, representations of disability in African American culture must be interpreted in conjunction with issues of blackness without being abstracted into symbols for the effects of racism alone. In the context of Butler’s “Evening,” DGD operates as a disability metaphor that alludes to the parallel and overlapping forms of discrimination that have occurred for both black and disabled people.

The second larger theoretical argument this article advances is that a crip theoretical approach in black disability studies should expand the boundaries of disability as a material and discursive concept.¹⁴ Alison Kafer writes that disability studies has often focused on apparent physical and sensory disabilities rather than cognitive and mental disabilities or chronic illnesses and diseases. Kafer argues that this omission is particularly problematic when we consider how chronic illnesses and diseases like diabetes and asthma are more common among people of color and people in poverty. Kafer then proposes a crip theoretical approach that expands the work of disability studies to include “those who lack a ‘proper’ (read: medically acceptable, doctor-provided, and insurer-approved) diagnosis for their symptoms” as well as “people identifying with disability and lacking not only a diagnosis but any ‘symptoms’ of impairment” to explore how the disabled/nondisabled binary is created and maintained (12, 13). Black disability studies needs such a crip theoretical approach that expands the boundaries and definitions of disability because it allows for the inclusion of issues related to disease and illness, disabling secondary health effects of illness and disease, and the role of race and class in gaining access to

medical care and treatment within the medical-industrial complex. If, as Robert McRuer argues, “crip theory should continue to conjure up the disability to come,” then black disability studies can play a vital role in this theoretical task by considering how black people’s “bodyminds” are often particularly vulnerable to the many racist structures that,¹⁵ for example, put black people at higher risk for police violence and incarceration, subject black people to various forms of medical discrimination and abuse, and disproportionately place environmental hazards in poor black neighborhoods (200). A crip theory approach to black disability studies must therefore engage the concept of disability as simultaneously material, historical, relational, and discursive to account for how disability and blackness are both intersectional and mutually constitutive.

I model this crip theoretical approach in my analysis of “Evening” because DGD can have disabling effects eventually, but not immediately. Butler developed this nonrealist disease by combining aspects of three real-world diseases: Huntington’s disease, phenylketonuria, and Lesch-Nyhan disease, each of which can or will be disabling, but not necessarily inherently or immediately so (“Evening” 69). DGD is also explicitly compared to other eventually or potentially disabling diseases in the story, including “leprosy,” because of how people are isolated, and diabetes, due to diet as a form of disease management (37-39). DGD thus has no real-world equivalent; however, it was constructed with issues of disability and disease clearly in mind. In the story, the major characters Lynn, Alan, and Beatrice lack any current symptoms of impairment and could be read as temporarily nondisabled.¹⁶ It is understandable, then, how scholars might overlook disability in the text since, with the exception of Alan’s mother Naomi, who is blind, the named characters are not explicitly marked as disabled.¹⁷ However, understanding how the story engages with parallel or related contemporary and historical enactments of ableism and antiblack racism requires a crip theoretical approach to the boundaries and borders of disability in relationship to disease, illness, and health, especially among racialized populations.

Reading DGD as Disability Metaphor

“**E**vening” narrates the many ways in which people with DGD experience oppression and discrimination structurally, socially, and internally. The story simultaneously addresses issues of blackness and disability, demonstrating how ableism and antiblack racism have often colluded or have been enacted through similar methods of oppression. The multiple examples of discrimination and their effects in the text each relates to contemporary and historical expressions of these oppressions. In discussing these examples, I demonstrate that interpreting disability metaphors does not require abstracting disability out of the analysis because the use of disability metaphors in African American texts is often directly connected to the mutually constitutive nature of disability and blackness. Moreover, while DGD is a disease, I refer to DGD as a disability metaphor as part of a crip black disability studies approach that expands the boundaries of disability as a material and discursive concept. Throughout this discussion I refer to the experiences of black people and people with disabilities, but this is not to suggest that these groups are distinct. These examples of ableism and antiblack racism are more likely to occur in the lives of black disabled people who live at the nexus of these oppressions. Finally, several examples of discriminatory practices in the story could be applicable to other marginalized groups, such as nonblack people of color, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people, working-class people, and immigrants. Although my

argument focuses on ableism and antiblack racism, I do not foreclose the possibility of reading discrimination against DGDs in relationship to other types of oppression as well.

People with DGD face oppression and structural discrimination in “Evening” via “restrictive laws” and institutions (36). Of the two, institutions are more explicitly and extensively represented. People with DGD are purposefully and systematically kept out of sight and out of mind for the sake of the public, under the guise of protection and care. Readers are introduced to this form of discrimination at the very start when Lynn explains how her parents took her to a DGD ward when she was fifteen to show her what would happen if she weren’t more careful about managing her disease. Looking back, however, Lynn grimly notes that “it was where I was headed no matter what. It was only a matter of when: now or later” (35). Wards and institutions are mentioned multiple times throughout the text as problematic methods for warehousing DGDs who have become uncontrolled or are suspected of beginning to drift. For example, Beatrice, the coordinator of Dilg, describes how Alan’s mother Naomi became blind after being allowed to tear at her own eyes at a neglectful state-run facility because her parents couldn’t afford better, private care. In such facilities, Beatrice explains, “sometimes if patients were really troublesome—especially the ones who kept breaking free—they’d put them in a bare room and let them finish themselves. The only things those places took good care of were the maggots, the cockroaches, and the rats” (56). Institutions, therefore, are the major method of structural oppression in the text.

According to notes and drafts in her archive, Butler, a self-described “news-junkie” who regularly read both the *Los Angeles Times* and the *New York Times*, worked on “Evening” off and on between 1966 and 1985 (“Devil Girl” n. pag.). Taking this information into consideration, it is absolutely necessary to read the representation of institutions in “Evening,” including the creation of Dilg as an alternative to state institutions, as an engagement with the deinstitutionalization movement. Deinstitutionalization in the United States began in the late 1960s via the closure or downsizing of facilities for mentally and sometimes physically disabled people that were often sites of vast neglect and abuse.¹⁸ Inspired by investigative journalism that exposed the horrors of these places as well as activism by family members of patients, the deinstitutionalization movement promoted allowing people with disabilities to receive support to live with their families and in their communities.

While conducting research for her writing, Butler saved newspaper articles in “subject files” organized topically in manila envelopes with article titles and topics listed on the outside. In an envelope labeled “Mental Health,” Butler saved Barry Siegel’s article, “Confined 15 Years for Being Different,” from the *Los Angeles Times* of March 6, 1977 and noted three other articles she collectively labeled “Mental Health Care” (Siegel). In another envelope labeled “Handicaps,” Butler included the article “Blind, Deaf Woman Confined 19 Years” from the *Los Angeles Times* of May 5, 1978. In “Evening,” Lynn, Alan, and Beatrice’s perspectives on DGD institutions resemble those who sought to close down or change the nature of large, government-run institutions. Further, the descriptions of the horrors of DGD wards seem directly inspired by the media’s depictions of mental institutions in the U. S. in the 1970s that Butler was clearly following.¹⁹

References to institutions, however, also have racial connotations that illuminate the intertwined relationship of ableism and antiblack racism in the history of the United States. Jonathan Metzl argues that “deinstitutionalization did not simply dictate which patients the state set free; it also decided which patients the state held onto” (16). Metzl writes that black patients, particularly men, were more likely to be kept in institutions during the deinstitutionalization movement. This retention of black people in institutions was due in part to changes in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, which redefined schizophrenia as a violent

mental disability, often directly associated with black men, especially those involved in civil rights activism. This containment of black people considered violent and dangerous continues today in the prison-industrial complex that disproportionately institutionalizes black people. Butler makes the connection between DGD institutions and prisons clear when Lynn notes the security surrounding Dilg and states that “a maximum security prison wouldn’t have been as potentially dangerous” (“Evening” 45). Lavender also notes that Lynn’s description of herself as marking time could be read as an allusion to serving a prison sentence (78). It is possible, therefore, to interpret institutions in “Evening” as alluding to forms of structural discrimination against both people with disabilities and black people.

In addition to structural discrimination, people with DGD in “Evening” are also oppressed informally or unofficially—that is, independently of the state—through social discrimination. This occurs, for example, through judgment regarding food. People with DGD must maintain a restricted diet to manage the disease. Lynn refuses to eat in public because people stare or make fun of her DGD food, calling it “dog biscuits” (“Evening” 38).²⁰ The representation of having a restricted diet for health reasons provides an allusion to multiple kinds of disabilities, including celiac disease and Crohn’s disease. While gluten-free, vegan, and related products are becoming increasingly common, for a long time people with food restrictions were often left out of the social aspects of food, such as eating out and attending dinner parties, or their presence was deemed an imposition on others. Although she had no formal diagnosis of a food-related disability, late in life as her health declined Butler herself adopted veganism (“OEB 3772”).

In addition to these disability- and diet-related aspects of discrimination, there are racialized and classist aspects of how foods associated with certain groups are marked as strange, unhealthy, or unappetizing. For African Americans, cultural association with and consumption of soul food can lead to social discrimination. For example, eating chitterlings/chitlins and cooking with ham hocks or salt pork each emerged in African American culinary history through conditions of slavery and poverty, but often have negative associations because these foods come from the less-valued portions of the pig (Yentsch 85; Whit 48, 51). Furthermore, in discussions of health and size, scrutiny regarding black people’s diets, especially those of poor black people in urban spaces, often carries racist overtones. In these discussions, black people are positioned as unable to make what are considered good and healthy choices because of their culture, their ignorance, or their inability to access such foods, even though experts vary widely when specifying what actually constitutes good food or a healthy diet.²¹ In all of these instances, judgment of diet can become a form of social discrimination for disabled and black people.

Social discrimination further occurs in “Evening” through stereotyping and social isolation. People move away from Lynn upon realizing, due to her food or her medical emblem, that she has DGD. DGDs wear medical emblems because, in addition to needing to follow restrictive diets, they must also avoid many widely-used drugs. The emblems mark people with DGD as having the disease for medical purposes and yet, at the same time, provide a means for social discrimination. The text refers to people with DGD as “lepers” among the general population, an explicit disability comparison (“Evening” 39). Non-DGDs create this distance because people with DGD have been stereotyped as having the potential to become suddenly, unpredictably violent. This association of a group with violence connotes stereotypes of both people with mental disabilities and black people. Even though people with mental disabilities are far more likely to be the victims than the perpetrators of violence, they are stereotyped as more violent than the average person (Desmarais, et al.). Similarly, black people, especially black men, have long been associated with violence and seen as threats to white people, especially white women. “Evening” represents not only how these stereotypes affect non-DGDs’ reactions to

people with DGD, but also how individual cases of violence, like that involving Lynn's father, draw the bulk of the media attention, while advocacy groups—in the story, the Duryea-Gode Disease Foundation—spend millions attempting to counter this dominant narrative.

In the story's representation of social discrimination, structural and social oppression reinforce one another cyclically. The interaction between these forms of oppression muddies a strictly causal relationship. For instance, Lynn mentions DGDs' "problems with jobs, housing, schools" that stem from negative news stories about those who become uncontrollably violent once they have drifted ("Evening" 36). Here structural discrimination occurs informally even when no laws officially exist to restrict access or opportunity, manifesting instead as social discrimination. Historically, both black people and people with disabilities have been denied or passed over for jobs, housing, and education due to social perceptions about them, even when such denial, when explicitly based on race or disability, is illegal. Informal and indirect social discrimination further reinforces formal and explicit structural discrimination as well. Lynn explains that Alan, despite his intelligence, will likely not be admitted to medical school as a person with DGD. That lack of opportunity isolates and limits Alan according to the logic that he, as a member of a marginalized group, is violent and in need of containment. Stereotypes about DGDs as threats not only cause others to keep their distance, but also potentially form the groundwork for new and more restrictive formal discriminatory structures.

Further exploring the relationship between forms of discrimination, "Evening" also depicts how structural and social discrimination can produce internalized oppression. Internalized oppression is apparent in the hopelessness and self-destructive behaviors of some DGDs, especially Alan, whom the story depicts as particularly morose and bitter. Alan tells Lynn that he will kill himself when he realizes he has started to drift and says that his parents, both DGDs, should have aborted him. He then goes on to assert, "Hell, they should pass a law to sterilize the lot of us."²² When Lynn expresses surprise at this statement and asks Alan if he would "want someone else telling you what to do with your body," he replies, "No need. . . . I had that taken care of as soon as I was old enough" ("Evening" 42).²³ Alan's statement that DGDs should not be allowed to reproduce suggests that he does not think there is any benefit to their existence in the world—or at least that the bad greatly outweighs the good in their lives. The story demonstrates, therefore, how external forms of discrimination (structural and social) often lead to self-discrimination and internalized oppression when marginalized people begin to believe the stereotypes about themselves and believe they deserve the discriminatory treatment they receive.

Lynn's reactions to Alan's statements further support reading this section of the story through the lens of internalized oppression. When Alan mentions his choosing to be sterilized, Lynn narrates: "This left me staring. I'd thought about sterilization. What DGD hasn't?" (42). Lynn assumes that all DGDs have considered sterilization, demonstrating her own internalized oppression. The discussion of voluntary sterilization alludes to the histories of involuntary sterilization for black and disabled people. For many black women in the United States, coerced or secret sterilization and other forms of manipulative birth control have made reproductive choice and justice nonoptions.²⁴ There is similarly a history of sterilizing women with disabilities, especially those with cognitive and developmental disabilities, without their consent. People with disabilities also continue to be considered non-sexual, unable to have children, or unable to parent, and as a result are often denied sexual education and parental rights.²⁵ Lynn's internalized oppression also becomes evident later in the story when she and Alan begin their relationship. She states, "Who else would have us?" and "We probably wouldn't last very long, anyway" (43). Here Lynn assumes that no non-DGD would want to be in a relationship with a DGD. This parallels social romantic segregation against black and disabled people

through which interracial relationships have been socially disapproved and officially made illegal, while relationships between disabled and nondisabled people are assumed to be based on fetish or imbalanced in terms of care and support.²⁶ This grim perspective on the world suggests how structural and social discrimination, in combination with the material impact of DGD, produces internalized oppression for Lynn. Together, Alan's and Lynn's views of people with DGD demonstrate how internalized oppression affects self-perception, hope, relationships, and behavior.

Finally, the story represents passing as a conscious or subconscious behavior resulting from the combination of structural, social, and internalized discrimination. Lynn wears her medical emblem on a necklace chain tucked inside her blouse. She observes that "[e]very now and then there are news stories about people who stopped carrying their emblems—probably trying to pass as normal. Then they have an accident. By the time anyone realizes there is anything wrong, it's too late" (38). Lavender reads this discussion of hiding or forgoing medical emblems as symbolic of racial passing, stating that "many light-skinned blacks have disappeared within the white world—passed for white—in response to discrimination, at a heavy cost to their positive self-identity" (74). Passing, however, is not a phenomenon exclusive to black people or even people of color. Passing narratives also exist in regard to disability, gender, sexuality, class, and religion. The combination of structural, social, and internalized discrimination creates the forces that make purposeful passing, for brief or extended periods of time, an alluring option for those who are able to do so.²⁷ However, as "Evening" suggests, passing is not without risk and for people with DGD who do not merely hide, but actually dispense with their medical emblems, passing can result in death. Historically, violence and death have also resulted for those caught passing, particularly those passing across racial and gender lines. Passing to avoid disability stigma can have long-term negative health effects when a person pushes their bodymind beyond its capacity in damaging ways to appear more nondisabled.²⁸

While the many ways in "Evening" in which people with DGD experience structural, social, and internalized discrimination have direct connections to the histories of ableism and antiblack racism, the story also connects blackness and disability in more positive ways as well. The story represents the possibility of creativity, purpose, community, and other positive outcomes stemming directly from DGD, which can be read as symbolic of positive outcomes resulting from black and disabled identities and from experiences of ableism and antiblack racism. For the most part, "Evening" is quite dark. In notes for the story, Butler wrote keywords she wanted to keep in mind while shaping the narrative, such as "Doomed," "Desperate," "Empty," and "Hopeless," describing Lynn in particular as "Defensively Cynical" ("OEB 505"). While these words resonate clearly with the overall tone of most of the text, there is a clear shift in the story when Lynn and Alan visit Dilg and find out that not all DGDs necessarily meet the fate everyone assumes they must have. Elana Gomel argues that "Butler's story ends with a strange semi-utopian twist . . . [because it] appears to contain a promise of a better future" (420). Such a better future could come because DGDs at Dilg are able to live longer and quell their destructive tendencies to work in both scientific and artistic fields. Aline H. Kalbian and Lois Shepherd argue that "Butler's story appears to say that genetic conditions that are generally viewed negatively may enhance rather than detract from a person's ability to make a meaningful contribution to the world" (19). In other words, "Evening" suggests that achievement can occur not in spite of disability or blackness, but through it. This representation is of critical importance because although DGDs face grim biological odds as well as many forms of discrimination, there is hope. "Evening" uses DGD as a disability metaphor to allude to and connect multiple forms of oppression, while also using Dilg as a symbol of resistance to oppression and the persistence of life.

“Evening” suggests that people with DGD can have meaningful lives even if those lives are more painful, less independent, or shorter than average. As Kalbian and Shepherd note:

Clearly there is a difference between assigning meaning to the lives of others for our own purposes and recognizing the meaning they have found for themselves in their own lives. Butler’s story appears to avoid (but only narrowly and not as clearly as it might) the problem of justifying the existence of DGD for the benefit of people other than those with the disease. In the story the special gifts of the individuals with DGD seem to have significant benefit to them; and Lynn seems to find a place for herself in the world by viewing her own double dose of DGD as granting her a special ability that she can use to pursue a satisfying and meaningful (and meaningful to her) career. (17)

The story’s move to offer the possibility of a different, but still meaningful life is critical to its intervention in terms of both disability and blackness, as disabled people and black people have both been assumed to have less to contribute to society and to experience inherently more difficult lives. For people with disabilities, this sentiment is so severe that there is a pernicious cultural belief that people with certain kinds of disabilities are better off dead.

I would add to Kalbian and Shepherd’s arguments by noting that DGDs are able to do their work at Dilg only by living in community and under the influence of pheromones produced by double-DGD women like Lynn and Beatrice. The context in which DGDs are able to live more meaningful and productive lives does not negate or reduce the importance of their achievements; rather, it provides another method of resistance to oppression: community. Dilg is a community of people with DGD, a place of possibility in the midst of a seemingly hopeless narrative. Dilg offers a chance at life for people who see no viable futures for themselves once their disease takes full effect. The community and life at Dilg are nonnormative and interdependent in ways that some, such as Alan, find unacceptable. Dilg is therefore a form of self-segregation that some people find regressive or dangerous, but it is also a space where people with DGD who are otherwise oppressed in the wider world can exist apart from the kinds of discrimination depicted throughout the story.

The representation of DGDs at Dilg symbolizes not only how positive outcomes can arise from experiences of oppression and nonnormativity, but also how those positive outcomes can be fostered particularly through communities rather than through individuals alone. This is perhaps most evident in regard to disability in terms of independent-living centers or educational institutions like Gallaudet, and, with respect to blackness, in terms of black churches or historically black colleges and universities. In these spaces, shared identity and shared experiences of oppression become the basis of communities of support that often foster increased happiness, self-confidence, and feelings of belonging rather than of isolation. Community then can be a way of unlearning internalized oppression while also potentially working to change and dismantle social and structural oppressions. In the end, “Evening” shows how people with DGD are oppressed structurally, socially, and internally, but also how community and hope emerge in the face of such oppression.

Embracing Complexity

Octavia E. Butler’s short story “Evening” alludes to multiple experiences of discrimination—structural, social, and internal—as well as hope and community that can arise in response to oppression. This representation of discrimination against DGDs cannot easily be interpreted as a straightforward stand-in for any single marginalized group. Instead, Duryea-Gode disease operates as a disability metaphor that reveals how ableism and antiblack racism have been,

and continue to be, enacted in similar fashions, suggesting more about the mutually constitutive nature of oppression than about blackness or disability alone. This reading of DGD models two approaches I believe are essential to black disability studies: the reading of disability metaphors as having multiple literal and figurative meanings, and a crip theoretical expansion of the category of disability as a material and discursive concept.

First, the depiction of DGD in “Evening” shows how representations of disability can work metaphorically without abstracting disability itself out of the text as a key political and social issue. The concern in disability studies has often been that reading disability as a metaphor for other concepts erases the materiality of disabled people’s lives and depoliticizes disability in the interpretation of a narrative. My reading of “Evening,” however, demonstrates the importance to black disability studies of reading disability metaphorically because disability metaphors often provide cogent allusions to the historical and contemporary intersectionality and mutually constitutive nature of blackness and disability in the United States. Rather than obscuring or erasing disability as a political concern in a text, therefore, disability metaphors can (but do not always) enable coalitional understandings of the relationship between disability and other social categories.

Second, reading DGD as a disability is important for black disability studies because it encourages a crip theoretical expansion of the category and concept of disability. The main characters Lynn, Alan, and Beatrice have a disease that, at least when the story takes place, has no mental or physical effects—they are essentially temporarily able-bodied. However, they still experience ableism for having the disease and they know that disability is in their future. Discussing these characters and the text through the lens of disability is therefore essential. Following the lead of Alison Kafer and Robert McRuer, I argue that black disability studies must push the boundaries of the concept of disability to consider how the disabled/nondisabled binary is created and maintained through the very methods of oppression explored in Butler’s story. We must incorporate issues of health, illness, and disease into black disability studies if we are to further parse and understand the relationship of blackness and disability. We must, for example, develop ways to acknowledge the disabling effects of racialized violence without making disability a terrifying specter; to discuss race and disability without collapsing the two or obscuring the experiences of disabled people of color; and trace how the discursive use of disability has been and continues to be used as a justification for oppression—without insisting on able-bodiedness and able-mindedness as precursors for rights, respect, and freedom.

This reconsideration of what and how we read in black disability studies is a critical part of embracing the messy complexity of diverse representations in African American culture, like those for which Octavia E. Butler is so well known. Reading “Evening” as symbolizing the relationships between and intersections of ableism and antiblack racism requires both understanding how disability metaphors can be concretely connected to the lived experiences of disability and how black disability studies cannot be limited to current medical and legal definitions of disability alone. Instead, black disability studies must embrace an expansive crip theoretical understanding of disability and ability as a system of privilege and oppression that defines what constitutes acceptable bodyminds and behaviors, often in very racialized ways.²⁹ These nuanced and expansive approaches to disability metaphors and the concept of disability will provide for an exciting and innovative future for black disability studies.

Notes 1. Only Lynn’s boyfriend Alan has his race identified, via the information that his father was Nigerian. It is important that the only racially identified character is black.

2. For purposes of linguistic variety, I will alternate between “people with DGD” and “DGDs” to refer to this group. In the story, Butler uses only “DGDs” to refer to this group.

3. I take all citations of page numbers of “The Evening and the Morning and the Night” from the 2005 edition of *Bloodchild and Other Stories*. The story also appears in *Omni* 104 (May 1987): 56-66; *The Year’s Best Science Fiction: Fifth Annual Collection*, Gardner Dozois, ed. (New York: St. Martin’s, 1988), 280-302; *Callaloo* 14.2 (1991): 477-94; and *Bloodchild and Other Stories* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1995), 33-70.

4. See Kalbian and Shepherd; Eric Carl Link, “Introduction: Naturalism and Science Fiction,” *Studies in American Naturalism* 8.1 (2013): 1-5; Hammer; or Florian Bast, “‘I Hugged Myself’: First-Person Narration as an Agential Act in Octavia Butler’s ‘The Evening and the Morning and the Night,’” in *Black Intersectionalities: A Critique for the 21st Century*, Monica Michlin and Jean-Paul Rocchi, eds. (New York: Liverpool UP, 2014), 68-82.

5. See Green; Gornel; Andrea Hairston, “Octavia Butler-Praise Song to a Prophetic Artist,” in *Daughters of Earth: Feminist Science Fiction in the Twentieth Century*, Justine Larbalestier, ed. (Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 2006), 287-304; or Marty Fink, “AIDS Vampires: Reimagining Illness in Octavia Butler’s *Fledgling*,” *Science Fiction Studies* 37.3 (2010): 416-32.

6. Butler began disclosing her dyslexia in 1990 in interviews. See *Conversations with Octavia Butler*, Conseula Francis, ed. (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2010), 36, 39, 86.

7. I define disability as a socially constructed concept that deems certain bodyminds and behaviors acceptable and others pathologically nonnormative and deviant, often through the discourses of medicine, psychology, cure, and rehabilitation.

8. The most often-discussed version of this perspective on disability metaphor is Mitchell and Snyder’s *Narrative Prosthesis*. See also Elizabeth J. Donaldson, “The Corpus of the Madwoman: Toward a Feminist Disability Studies Theory of Embodiment and Mental Illness,” *NWSA Journal* 14.3 (2002): 99-119.

9. See Mitchell and Snyder, chapter 4.

10. For critiques of ableist metaphors, see Sami Schalk, “Metaphorically Speaking: Ableist Metaphors in Feminist Writing,” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 33.4 (2013), Web; or Vivian M. May and Beth A. Ferri, “Fixated on Ability: Questioning Ableist Metaphors in Feminist Theories of Resistance,” *Prose Studies* 27.1-2 (2005): 120-40. For discussions of oppression analogies, see Mark Sherry, “(Post)Colonising Disability,” in *Intersecting Gender and Disability: Perspectives in Rethinking Postcolonial Identities*, Pushpa Naidu Parekh, ed., spec. issue of *Wagadu* 4 (Summer 2007): 10-22; Chris Ewart, “Terms of Disappropriation: Disability, Diaspora and Dionne Brand’s *What We All Long For*,” *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 4.2 (2010): 147-61; or Samuels.

11. See Ato Quayson, *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation* (New York: Columbia UP, 2007); or Barker.

12. See Dea H. Boster, *African American Slavery and Disability: Bodies, Property, and Power in the Antebellum South, 1800-1860* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

13. See Douglas C. Baynton, “Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History,” in *The New Disability History: American Perspectives*, Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky, eds. (New York: New York UP, 2001), 33-57. For a discussion of the creation of disability in other contexts, see also Nirmala Erevelles, *Disability and Difference in Global Contexts: Enabling a Transformative Body Politic* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

14. Crip theory is a strain of disability studies theory, inspired by queer theory, which expands the boundaries of the field. McRuer writes that crip theory has “a similar contestatory relationship to disability studies and identity that queer theory has to LGBT studies and identity, [although] crip theory does not—perhaps paradoxically—seek to dematerialize disability identity” (35).

15. I use the term “bodymind” after Price, who defines it as “the imbrication (not just the combination) of the entities usually called ‘body’ and ‘mind’ ” (270).

16. Both Green and Hammer compare people with DGD to people living with HIV/AIDS (Green 179-80; Hammer 96). While neither discusses this connection extensively, the comparison is important to note given the tenuous position of HIV/AIDS within the field of disability studies and its increasing prevalence among black populations. For more on HIV/AIDS in disability studies, see Ally Day, “Resisting Disability, Claiming HIV: Introducing the Ability Contract and Conceptualizations of Liberal Citizenship,” *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies* 3.3 (2014): 104-21.

17. In addition to Naomi, other unnamed disabled characters exist in the text’s background. As Lynn tours Dilg, she states, “Scars didn’t bother me much. Disability didn’t bother me,” describing how “some people had half their faces ruined or had only one hand or leg or had other obvious scars” (“Evening” 50, 51).

18. For more on the deinstitutionalization movement, see Gerald N. Grob, *From Asylum to Community: Mental Health Policy in Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991).

19. In addition to the articles Butler saved in her personal papers, a search of the *Los Angeles Times* online archive reveals that there were thousands of articles and op-ed pieces on institutions published between 1966 and 1985 when Butler was writing the story. See, for example, B. J. Phillips, "U.S. Mental Health a 'Tragedy,'" *Los Angeles Times* 4 Aug. 1969: 1-d8; Harry Nelson, "Mental Institutions' Use of Foreign Doctors Hit," *Los Angeles Times* 2 May 1972: 1-a7; Jerry Gillam, "36 More Mental Hospital Deaths 'Questionable,'" *Los Angeles Times* 20 Nov 1976: 2-a1; or Richard M. Walden, "California's Shame: The Mental Hospitals," *Los Angeles Times* 21 Nov. 1976: 1-i5.

20. The dehumanizing association of one's food with dog food also contains antiblack racist associations because black people have often been compared to animals and considered less evolved as human beings than white people.

21. See Anna Mollow, "Unvictimized: Toward a Fat Black Disability Studies," in *Blackness and Disability*, Theri A. Pickens, ed., spec. issue of *African American Review* 50.2 (2017): 105-21.

22. The relationship of structural and social oppression to internalized oppression is particularly evident in Alan's remarks about choosing whether to have children. In the United States, eugenic practices emerged in the late nineteenth century in response to concerns about the increasing numbers of racial minorities, ethnic whites, and women in the public sphere and workforce. The eugenic term *feebleminded* was used loosely in regard to anyone whose behaviors were thought to be "inappropriate," "threatening," or otherwise deviating from social and sexual norms, and became grounds for institutionalization and involuntary sterilization (Kline 25). The story therefore alludes to forms of structural discrimination within the representation of internalized discrimination as well.

23. Lavender reads this moment in the story as an example of internalized racism, but interestingly, in a footnote to this argument, he writes that "Alan's decision could also be interpreted in light of his awareness that all of his offspring would have DGD. Such a difficult decision may not be uncommon for people who are genetically predisposed to have severely disabled children" (80). This is the only place in Lavender's two pieces on this story in which he suggests a nonracial interpretation and explicitly relates it to disability.

24. See Dorothy E. Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Pantheon, 1997).

25. See Abby Wilkerson, "Disability, Sex Radicalism and Political Agency," in *Feminist Disability Studies*, Kim Q. Hall, ed. (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2011), 193-217.

26. See Sarah Smith Rainey, *Love, Sex, and Disability: The Pleasures of Care* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2011).

27. It is important to note that passing is not always a conscious choice and that passing also sometimes occurs indirectly when others make assumptions about a person's identity.

28. For more on disability and passing in various manifestations, see *Disability and Passing: Blurring the Lines of Identity*, Jeffrey A. Brune and Daniel J. Wilson, eds. (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2013).

29. See Ashley Taylor, "The Discourse of Pathology: Reproducing the Able Mind through Bodies of Color," *New Conversations in Feminist Disability Studies*, Kim Q. Hall, ed., spec. issue of *Hypatia* 30.1 (2015): 181-98.

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