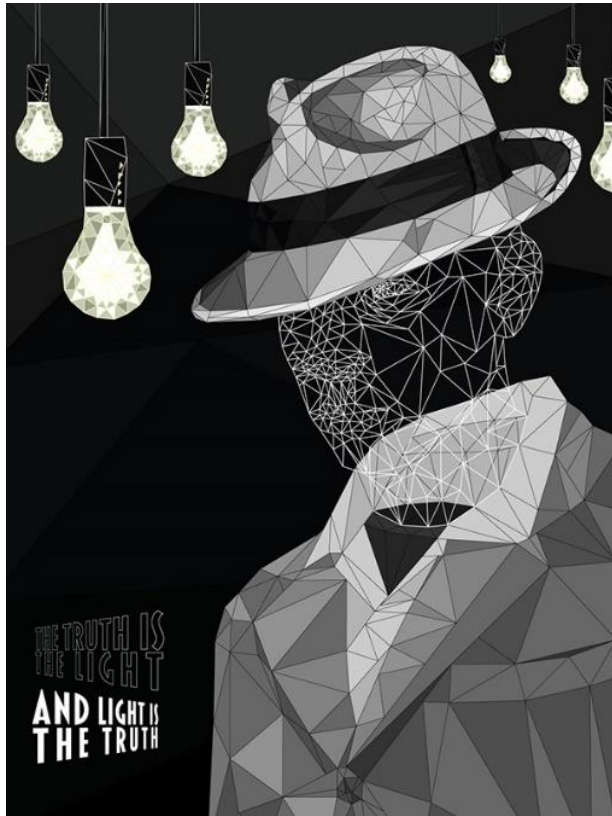


Hearing A Black Ghost Made Flesh: “Three-ness” and the Afrophasmic

By: D’Arcee Charington Neal

“There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle, because we do not live single-issue lives.”
-Audre Lorde

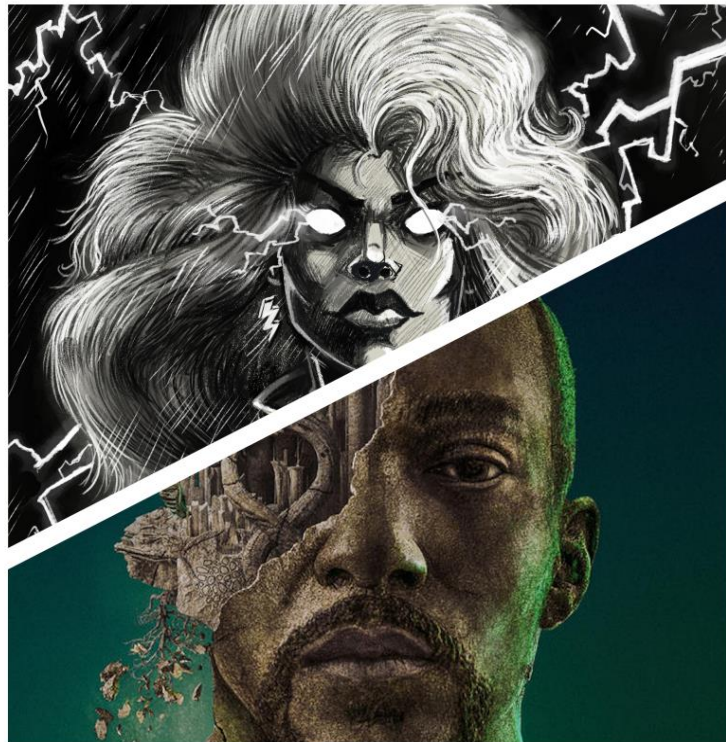


Fan art of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man

As a singular identity, Black disability has been completely misunderstood. Throughout the academy as I was working my way through school as a Black queer man with cerebral palsy, whenever the literature talked about dealing with people who sat in the intersections disability and race, I’d always heard it referred to as being part of either the “multi-marginalized” or worse, the “double deficit,” and neither of these make me feel any more seen. I take issue with the first phrase because as a rhetorical scholar, the idea of being multi-marginalized as a Black disabled person doesn’t actually mean anything in particular. It stands as a kind of vanilla-flavored umbrella term that could be applied in numerous ways, but to me, it always reads as bland. In many ways, my issues echo a similar sentiment that has started to gain traction around the internet within the last few years, as the term BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, Person of Color) becomes more and more mainstream. That’s a very specific subset of lived experiences, and while Black indigenous

people certain do exist, to use the term as a catchall phrase for anyone you don't want to think of as "white," doesn't work. I stand firmly in the camp of Blackity Black. Period. Equally, this is also why I detest "double-deficit," rooted as it is within the understanding of worst of the worst. While it is true that being Black and disabled in America today is a complicated set of circumstances, I could equally argue under Mike Oliver's 1983 social model of disability that "it is not the individual's limitations, of whatever kind, which are the cause of the problem, but society's failure to provide appropriate services and adequately ensure the needs of disabled people" (2) which cause the issue within my particular lens of lived experience. Therefore, I needed to find another way to describe my experience. That word, is Afrophantasm.

It represents a combination of ideas and thoughts that I've worked with for several years within English and disability studies, that pull from the idea of lived experiences, coupled with performance and recognition of the body, but focuses the concept in a decidedly Black way. And while I have been reading and pulling from a variety of sources thinking about for example: the way Blackness is reified and showcased in



Marvel's Storm and Altered Carbon's Takeshi Kovacs

James Baldwin's work, or the rhetorical overtones of agency and power in Zora Neale Hurston's writing, the omnipresence of whiteness presented in American disability through Christopher

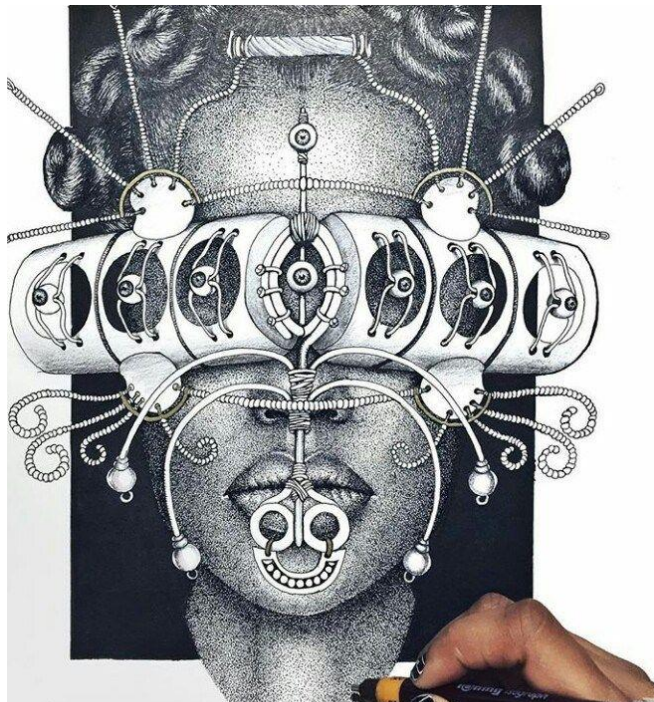
Bell's essays, and the representation of a clearly Black disabled mutant in Marvel comic's characterization of "Storm," or the uselessness of race and bodily autonomy showcased through Takeshi Kovacs in Netflix's *Altered Carbon* along with the idea of digital signifying through Sarah Florini's interrogation of Black Twitter, and all of it brings me back to a single overarching question that was never answered.

Why does Blackness and disability together seem so bad to everyone? In none of the examples presented above (perhaps barring Bell's work where he presents its absence as a mockery), will you see Black and disability loudly on display. I've dealt my entire life with being seen from the sides as a case of either/or, and so through my research, I wanted to think about it in a way absent from conceptions of valuation. At first glance, the realities of the two identities don't seem to be as dire as perhaps I make it sound, but when you consider what I mean on a deeper level of understanding, the truth of the matter begins to be revealed. In my opinion, black disability sounds bad rhetorically because of three distinct reasons.

First, because the idea of Blackness has existed as a rhetorical shorthand of *sub-human* for hundreds of years through the European conception of race and the familiarization of othering; through popular culture like how it is written in Shakespeare's *Othello* or Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Second, because of a modern interpretation (based on the first point) after the Emancipation Proclamation, Blackness appeared (and still appears) as an adjective of lesser standing, where it can mean a threat, poor, uneducated, lazy and many other things. Finally, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson writes that "the history of disabled people in the Western world is in part the history of being on display, of being visually conspicuous while politically and socially erased" (53.) Due to historically embedded cure narratives and stigmatized conceptions of value (Goffman, 1964) and bodily production, (Derrida, 2006) the

third and final idea of disability and rhetorical idea of weakness seems to round out the trifecta of aversion that is attached to this particular set of lived experiences. As a result, I wanted to combat this idea on the level of language and intent, while also considering how and why such a concept might work.

Put simply, Afrophantasm is a rhetorical state of being that adequately recognizes the lived states of Blackness and disability together with the understanding of the invisibility that accompanies that position, and the specific decision to weaponize said state in either a positive or a negative way. It's not enough to know that for example, I am both Black and disabled because how this information is relayed and understood is also equally important. Oftentimes, race and disability are "correlated...with violent and oppressive overtones," and are "conceptualized as being analogous to each other," (Erevelles, 1); and the idea that people can simply switch one for the other, when talking about the realities of oppression, considered as a moment of a lesser state, often puts me into a position of having to pick a side. But Kimberle Crenshaw, Theri



"Adanama" by Data Oruwari, 2016.

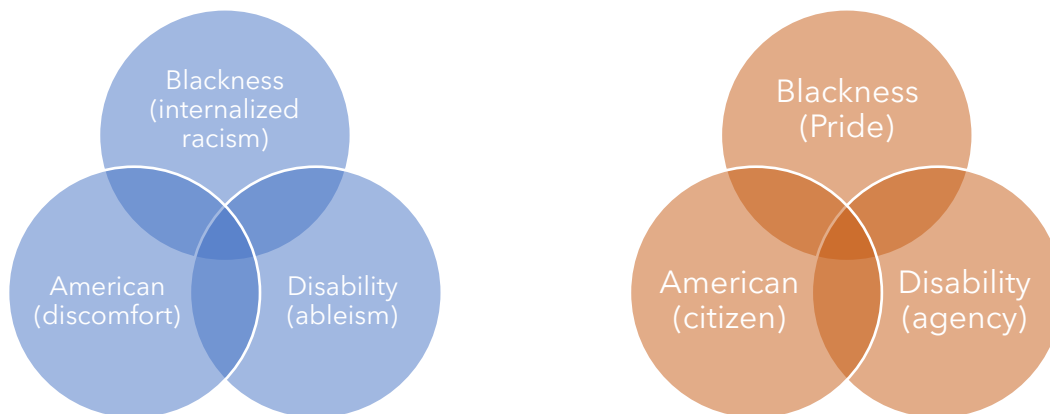
Pickens and others have instead, made it a point to constantly rebuke this idea. Her concept of intersectionality as "the interconnected nature of social categorizations...[and how they are] regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage" (Merriam-Webster, 1) sums up the overall point.

But the nuance regarding disability (as 15% of the world's population according to the World Health Organization) and the language we use to talk about it, hasn't caught up. As a rhetoric scholar, the concept of Afrophantasm is made up of four distinct methodologies including critical race theory, rhetorical theory, disability studies, and Afrofuturism. By combining the four ideas together, it allowed me to think about not only about the conception of the word, but also its potential uses and applications which I have drawn together in an Afrofuturist audio novel that I call *Spectre: AV* about a wheelchair user who gains the ability to turn into a digital ghost. It was important for me not only to suggest the ways that such an idea could operate, but also to think out loud about how it could be twisted and allocated as a rhetorical concept. Subsequently, such an idea ultimately has perfect merit in the realm of agency and embodiment relating to both the wider world and the individual.

As the first research method, by looking at critical race theory and my use of "afro" it roots the experience specifically in the realm of Blackness. As a counternarrative to Black negativity mentioned earlier, it's important for me that the work call out the way that Blackness has been misused and pushed aside in favor of capital, and the work of empire. No one does this better than W.E.B. Du Bois, and I focused on his seminal work *The Souls of Black Folk* when he wrote, "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others...One ever feels his two-ness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder." Though he is referring to the two-ness of being an American Negro in 1903, such views have never gone away. To that, I add a third layer which I consider "three-ness" of disability which makes up the concept of Afrophantasm where you are considered for your Black disabledness in the space of Americana.

From here, rhetorical theory (or how language is presented, and it's intent) works to explain how Afrophantasm can be seen and used, when considered through the lens of Black visual, (pictures) cultural, (speech), or embodied (lived) rhetorics. As a major part of my work, Black rhetoric through orality is a major foundational principle because much of Black history has always been relayed through talk and presentation. This for example, is a key reason why Spectre:AV, as the metaphor for my research is presented as an audio novel over traditional print to honor that spirit as a commentary for true Blackness. Rhetorically however, Afrophantasm is meant to be a neutral phrase and can be used in either a positive or a negative manner. and here the work of intent plays a large part as you consider that as a negative, you're highlighting the intersectionality of Black disability with invisibility and indicating the erasure that comes alongside of this recognition. In this way, Black disabled people can be effectively *afrophantomized* through society or their own actions, which conversely ignores both their Blackness and their disability.

Images of Negative vs. Positive Afrophantasm



This in turn, amplifies the spectral state they are presented in and should be categorized as such.

In a negative manner, the co-constitutive nature of the intersectional link between disability,

Blackness, and American agency, can be refashioned as internalized ableism, anti-Blackness, and a reliance on the state.

However, it can also be utilized in a positive manner, which capitalizes on others' negative understanding of stigma, racism, and discomfort in order to better one's own position. This is based largely on Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s research of the African tricker figure in the *Signifying Monkey* where he uses his opponent's own words to escape danger. Much of African American culture is about the reframing of white supremacy through style and Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman writes that "it is standard practice for vulnerable, multiply minoritized people to organize intellectual and political work around a theme of recovery, [and] of regaining what has been taken, [to] reinstate a former position of wholeness, [and reclaim] a former status of wellness" (1.) And so, taking the rhetorical work of something like *swag culture* and overcompensating for personal effect (also known as "stunting") and applying it to the lens of disability, works perfectly for the theory of Afrophantasm.

Next, since spectrality and invisibility makes up so much of the disabled experience, when borrowing from Disability Studies theory, I focused on Vivian Sobchack's idea of the phantom limb; where as amputee herself, she theorizes the concept of separate spaces of

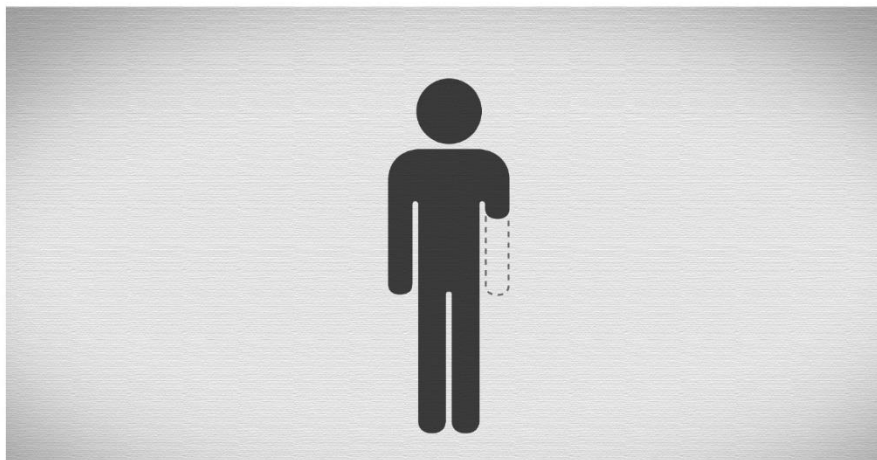


Image of a phantom limb. Source: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/17684875/>

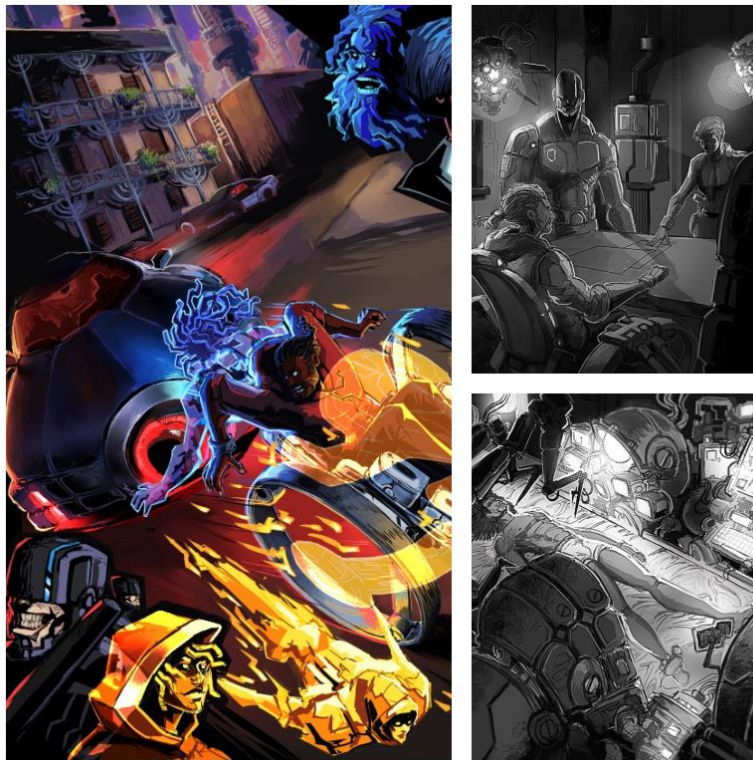
experience, and that people can inherently "mimetically understand their own experience [of] the lived body's double-sidedness [and] its capacity to be both...

‘here’ and ‘there,’ present and absent” (53.) This was added to Margaret Price’s concept of the bodymind as a singular space, Judith Butler’s idea of identity performance, and then finally combined with Rosemarie Garland Thomson’s concept of staring and the visual power of disabled recognition as a way to articulate stigma and ableism simultaneously in order to overturn it.

The last and final method is the theory of Afrofuturism, which was coined by scholar Mary Dery in 1990 and serves as a counternarrative to European storytelling. It requires the centering of Black bodies in a progressive and forward way and always filters through the work of technology, though this idea has changed over time. Afrofuturism has moved through music, art, literature, and film into a more substantial ideology in the modern age that demands recognition of Blackness as a primary focus; as such, this works well with Afrophantasm because under it, the use of medical technology and assistive devices are reframed from narrative cures and weakness into strength and adaptation which are core tenets of Afrofuturism’s vision.

All of these ideas are combined and worked through my audio novel *Spectre:AV*, which showcases Black disability through the ideas of a futuristic Neo Orleans in the year 2135. In the story, Kyrie Di’allo goes from college student, to public enemy #1 after a racist medical organization kidnaps him to harvest his unique DNA but accidentally grants him the ability to change the world around him through his invisibility. I combine the various aforementioned methods with the keystone concept of critical fabulation coined by influential scholar Saidiya Hartman, and it talks about how to build creative worlds on top of slave archives full of missing information, in order to achieve narratological research. Hartman details the difficulties in trying to maintain power of historical agency when juxtaposed against death and archival erasure, and using her technique, *Spectre* is built from the real records of five disabled Black slaves who lived

in historical New Orleans in 1870. However instead of focusing on their deaths and limited information given by the hospital during the time in which they lived, I reexamine the spectacle of what it would've meant to be a Black disabled person in the far future under a different set of rules where the world has removed the need for disability completely.



Scenes from Spectre:AV

In conclusion, I created the idea for Afrophantasm as a way to give Black disabled people more autonomy over the words we use to describe ourselves. The ideas of marginalization and deficit continue to leave derogatory aftereffects attached to real people's lived experiences when the people who inhabit them, may not feel this way at all. So this was a way to honor those lives and to expound on the near limitless resilience that Black disabled people inhabit on a daily basis. Further, it's a way to call out the ignorance and macroaggression we receive all the time and to use such views in order to improve our own lives. Through Spectre:AV, I am presenting a

different reality where Black disability features prominently in the dead center, while pulling in all the threads that reimagine the lives of people who are overlooked. It's a high concept piece of creative scholarship that combines Black rhetorical theory with Afrofuturist dreams of disability and power, to show off the idea that stigma and performance can be weaponized through Black art. I wanted a Black power fantasy of high speed chases, gunfights, queer love stories, and historical research to show how powerful Afrophantasm can be when it's designed, created by, and starring Black disabled people; ultimately because we recognize that we are invisible, but I want people to know that that if we are, it's only because we choose to be.

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