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Crippling the Welfare Queen: The Radical Potential of Disability Politics

Over the past several decades, the mythical figure of the welfare queen has occupied a key space in the U.S. national imaginary. Presaged by Democratic Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan's 1965 report on Black matriarchal households and popularized during Ronald Reagan's 1976 bid for the Republican presidential nomination, the welfare queen offered a story of racialized mothering that would soon become the nation's primary narrative of public dependency. Reagan's depiction of a spendthrift from Chicago's South Side who posed as a mother of 14 to obtain state benefits inaugurated a discourse of policy reform that would breed slogans like George H.W. Bush's "cross-generational dependency," the commonly-invoked "welfare as a way of life," and the Clinton administration's "end of welfare as we know it." This narrative of dependency, anchored by ever-present mythologies of pathological Black motherhood, has vitally shaped the ongoing regime of state divestment whose intensification of material and social inequality we see fully in our contemporary moment. It represents a key tactic in a persistent history of state-sanctioned assaults upon racialized maternity, which range from the breaking of kinship ties along the Black Atlantic to the punitive surveillance of state foster care practices.

Following the propagation of this mythology by Reagan and others, feminist writers, scholars, and activists claimed the welfare mother as a generative site for Black feminist and feminist-of-color thought. In Cathy Cohen's pathbreaking 1997 essay "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?," the "non-normative and marginal" position of the welfare queen becomes one of the centers around which a radical queer politics might take shape.¹ Sapphire's novel *Push* (1996), published the same year as major US welfare

reform, mobilizes the figure of the welfare queen in order to map the purposeful failures of public support systems in a Reagan-era New York City. *Push*, too, underscores the radical potential for “progressive transformative coalition work” between the groups most antagonized by anti-welfare policy: racialized, low-income, and disabled populations.²

The relationship between the protagonist, 16-year old Claireece Precious Jones, and her disabled infant daughter rehearses the possibility of such an alliance. In introducing her daughter, Precious states: “[My mother] don’t love me. I wonder how she could love Little Mongo (thas my daughter)...[W]hat it is short for is Mongoloid Down Sinder, which is what she is; sometimes what I feel I is.”³ For scholars of Disability Studies, this passage may seem a strange place to locate political affinity, as it reduces the baby daughter to a diagnostic category.⁴ But in naming her daughter “Little Mongo,” an affectionate diminutive, Precious renders the language of diagnosis strange, re-directing it from its intended function of pathology to one of coalition and kinship. “Mongoloid Down Sinder” names what her daughter is, and also what Precious sometimes feels she is. As this essay will demonstrate, the unexpected affinity between Precious as welfare mother and her disabled baby daughter is not incidental. Rather, it reflects the ways in which ableist reasoning anchors anti-welfare rhetoric, casting entire categories of people as undeserving of public support. Though the language of reform may devalue Precious and Mongo by casting them both as dependent on public resources, writers like Sapphire demonstrate how dependency might function as an unexpected axis of affinity between groups framed as drains on the state.

This essay outlines the contours of this coalitional axis. Drawing together feminist- and queer-of-color critique with disability theory, it offers a literary-cultural reframing of racialized mothering considering critical discourses of disability. Whereas anti-welfare policy often cast

independence and self-ownership as national ideals, my analysis of the welfare mother elaborates a version of disability and feminist-of-color analysis that not only takes dependency as a given but also mines the term for its transformative potential. Rather than a negative property ascribed to certain segments of the population, here dependency describes a relationship articulated across all subjects and the support systems in which they are embedded—a recurring social and material bond vital to survival.

To imagine the welfare mother as a site for recuperating and re-envisioning dependency, I draw upon the “ruptural possibilities” of minority literary forms, to use Roderick Ferguson’s coinage, and place Sapphire’s *Push* in conversation with Jesmyn Ward’s acclaimed novel *Salvage the Bones* (2011).⁵ Both novels depict young Black mothers grappling with the disabling context of public infrastructural abandonment, in which the basic support systems for maintaining life—public schools, hospitals, housing, social services—have become increasingly compromised. As such, they enable an elaboration of a critical disability politic centered around welfare queen mythology and its attendant structures of state neglect, one that identifies, contests, and overwrites the punitive logics of public resource distribution. This disability politic, which I term a *crip-of-color critique*, foregrounds the critical purchase of disability for Black feminist and feminist-of-color theories of gendered and sexual state regulation, and in turn, ushers considerations of racialized reproduction and state violence to the forefront of critical disability analysis.

Toward a Crip-of-Color Critique

How might Disability Studies shift if it took up the welfare queen as a central site of inquiry? And in turn, how might a disability analysis highlight the little-acknowledged ways in

which discourses of *inability* have shaped the figure of the welfare queen and imbued her with rhetorical power? The welfare queen functions as perhaps the definitive disability narrative of late capitalism: a cautionary tale of state dependency that enabled the reallocation of public resources towards a global elite. And yet, disability remains overlooked in scholarly considerations of this figure, even as Black feminist critics like Cathy Cohen, Dorothy Roberts, Wahneema Lubiano, and Alexis Pauline Gumbs have thoroughly outlined the gendered, raced, classed, and queer dimensions of her narrative. The welfare queen, however, became legible as a public figure largely *through* ableist language and reasoning: she is defined necessarily as a *pathological* mother, a social aberrancy to be rehabilitated through workfare programs. Through her alleged inability to mother, work, or re/produce in accordance with social norms, articulated through the charge of her dependency on state resources, she furnished a useful “cover story” for global capitalism to propagate itself through the dismantling of social safety nets.⁶

Alongside the rhetorical mainstays of anti-Blackness and misogyny, the language of disability, pathology, and disease wrote the welfare queen into public legibility. According to Sanford F. Schram, the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (a bill widely regarded as major U.S. welfare reform) contributed considerably to the “medicalization” of welfare, as the act “helped accelerate the tendency to construct welfare dependency as an illness, thereby transforming welfare reform into a set of therapeutic interventions designed to cure people of a malady.”⁷ In other words, the dominant ideology of welfare dependency framed the need for public assistance *as itself* a disability, one subject to state management and cure. And as both Linda Singer and Alexis Pauline Gumbs have argued, the Reagan-era discourse around racialized reproduction framed Black teenage motherhood as an epidemic, one that justified the “wars on poverty and drugs that combined to situate disease

and enmity in the bodies of poor women.”⁸ The Black mother as disease, Gumbs elaborates, “[posed] a threat on privileged populations through tax burdens, crime, and the general erosion of quality of life,” representing a path of infection that moved from “oppressed” sites to privileged ones.⁹ Framed as both epidemic and threat, the narrative of racialized reproduction positioned poor Black mothers as disabling to the nation writ large.

Given the centrality of disability to anti-welfare mythology, I view the welfare queen as a key figure for bridging disability and feminist-of-color politics, transforming them through the mutual engagement of crip-of-color critique. At once a critical methodology, coalitional practice, and epistemological project, a crip-of-color critique attends to “the systematic relationship among forms of domination,” recognizing ableism as one vector operating alongside and through other structures of oppression.¹⁰ Following disability justice activist Patricia Berne, it contends that we can only understand ableism by “grasping its interrelations with heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, colonialism, and capitalism.”¹¹ In assessing these interrelations, a crip-of-color critique further identifies possible axes of solidarity across lineages of liberatory thought, in which the ableist logic of welfare reform offers—perhaps counterintuitively—a conduit toward political affinity and consolidation. This framework thus envisions an explicitly intersectional disability politics attuned to regulatory regimes of power, that is, the ways in which state-sanctioned and extralegal systems of domination interlock to circumscribe, police, and exploit racialized and low-income lives. Additionally, it foregrounds the strategies and responses of writers, artists, activists, and intellectuals in the face of racialized regimes of disablement.

As a critical methodology, a crip-of-color critique examines how the language of disability undergirds the ongoing erosion of public resources alongside other forms of state-

sanctioned violence.¹² Disability scholars have termed this form of analysis “cripping,” a reading practice analogous to queering that “[spins] mainstream representations or practices to reveal able-bodied assumptions and exclusionary effects.”¹³ To be clear, criping does not necessitate looking for diagnostic evidence of disability in a text, nor does it prioritize the positive representation of identifiably disabled characters. Rather, it uses disability as a lens for reading across literary and cultural works, through which the critic pays particular attention to how “able-bodied assumptions” inform the text at hand. Indeed, criping can explain how a text furthers a critical disability ethos even if no disabled characters are present at all. To “crip” the welfare queen, then, does not necessitate labeling her as disabled. Rather, criping underscores how ableist ideologies around dependency, reproduction, and labor give her story narrative power.

In “Enabling Whom? Critical Disability Studies Now,” Julie Avril Minich speaks to the political necessity of shifting from a disability studies defined through its objects of inquiry to one determined by its “method of analysis,” suggesting that such a shift would expand the scope of disability critique beyond its frequently single-issue focus. For Minich, disability as methodology “involves scrutinizing not bodily or mental impairments” but the “normative ideologies” that “define particular attributes as impairments” and that disproportionately concentrate disability in vulnerable populations. Embracing disability as methodology, then, would further connect the field to questions of race, power, and redistribution, and in so doing, “recommit [disability studies] to its origins in social justice work.”¹⁴ Notably for Minich, this recommitment to origins does not only involve the US disability rights movement, often credited as the catalyst for disability studies, but any and all movements that aim to liberate those with pathologized bodies and minds. In this way, disability as methodology also functions

to connect liberatory movements and intellectual genealogies that may initially bear little relation to one another, but whose shared resonances generate potential modes of thinking, living, and being in excess of normative ideologies.

In addition to crippling the logic of welfare reform and its “able-bodied assumptions,” a crip-of-color critique also examines how the language and theory of disability intervenes into dominant understandings of dependency. It takes seriously the assertion, forwarded by Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon in their essay “A Genealogy of Dependency,” that an “adequate response” to welfare reform and state divestment “would need to question our received valuations and definitions of dependence in order to allow new, emancipatory social visions to emerge.”¹⁵ As such, a crip-of-color framework responds to dependency’s pejorative usages in anti-welfare rhetoric, but also advances a less derogatory definition: dependency as a value-free relationship in which someone relies on someone or something else for support. This relationship to others is not inherently stigmatized but rather, to borrow a phrase from disability justice activist Eli Clare, “as common as morning coffee.”¹⁶ Further, drawing from feminist and disability thought, crip-of-color critique centralizes the concept of *interdependency*, a term that broadly describes a condition of shared dependence, an ecology of dependent relations, in which dependency can also be considered in terms of its mutualistic and symbiotic properties.¹⁷ As disability justice activist Mia Mingus writes, “[i]nterdependency is both ‘you and I’ and ‘we.’ It is solidarity, in the best sense of the word...Because the truth is: we need each other.”¹⁸ The relationship between dependency and interdependency, then, is one of recuperation: interdependency allows us to understand dependency beyond the single register of pathology, and further, prompts us to recognize the webs of support that enable us to live.

By connecting disability and feminist/ queer-of-color politics across the shared resonance of inter/dependency, a crip-of-color critique functions not only as a critical methodology, but also a coalitional practice. Its emphasis on dependency as a post-Civil Rights discourse that moves *across* categories of race, gender, and sexuality—as well as its critique of the normative ideology of *independence*—thus attends to, in the words of Grace Kyungwon Hong and Roderick Ferguson, the emergent ways in which “particular populations are rendered vulnerable to processes of death and devaluation over and against other populations.”¹⁹ Hong and Ferguson speak to the urgency of developing cross-categorical analytics that “profoundly question nationalist and identitarian modes of political organization and craft alternate understandings of subjectivity, collectivity and power,” particularly given the changing terrain of race and nation in the afterlives of decolonization and civil rights.²⁰ Single-issue frameworks built upon presumed similarity cannot attend to the ostensibly colorblind language of dependency that distinguishes deserving populations from those “undeserving” of state support. In centering discourses of dependency in its analysis, a crip-of-color critique thus enables the exploration of “crip affinity,” as disability scholar Lezlie Frye puts it, between disability politics and the targeted populations of welfare reform.²¹

Yet as Frye contends, this affinity remains underexplored in disability studies because of the prominence of a rights-based framework in much first-wave disability scholarship. Informed by the 1990 passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, the first comprehensive civil rights law for people with disabilities, this initial wave of scholarship favored a framework that posited disability as a minority identity (akin to race, sexuality, gender, and so forth) to which legal rights could accrue. In so doing, this framework moved disability away from the province of medical authority and toward the realm of accommodation, social critique, and resistance.

While a necessary shift, such platforms are nonetheless limited in their theorizations of disability beyond, as Michael Davidson puts it, “a Western, state-centered model that assumes values of individual rights and equality guaranteed by legal contract.”²² Further, as Dean Spade and others have argued, rights-based models implicitly frame the nation-state as a haven of protection, disregarding those populations regularly subject to state violence.²³ Some supporters of the ADA, in fact, colluded with the conservative logics of welfare reform by posing the legislation as vital to weaning disabled citizens off public assistance and sending them into the workforce.²⁴

Departing from rights-based paradigms, feminist disability scholars such as Frye, Minich, Nirmala Erevelles, Jasbir Puar, and Liat Ben-Moshe have begun to examine disability’s entanglements with the mechanisms of racialized state violence. A crip-of-color critique aligns itself with this emergent wave of scholarship, which theorizes disability “in terms of precarious populations” rather than those fortunate enough to access legal rights.²⁵ Following Frye, Minich, Erevelles, Puar, and others, it pays attention to how the state itself disables populations en masse through group-differentiated processes of resource deprivation and ableist rhetorics of dependency that frame racialized, feminized, impoverished, and disabled populations as drains on the public. In other words, it argues for a disability politics that understands the state as itself a racial-gendered apparatus of mass disablement. Following this, a crip-of-color critique underscores how the phantom of the welfare queen, alongside other bogeymen of reform (i.e., the undocumented immigrant), provides the narrative support for an ideology and praxis of resource austerity, in which the looming threat of parasitic others enables divestment in public services. In so doing, it emphasizes the close relationship between an ableist ideology of

scarcity as emblemized by the welfare mother and the wide-spread dismantling of public infrastructure intended to support the nation's most vulnerable.

To clarify this relationship, which threads together deviant mothering, disability, narratives of scarcity, and infrastructural erosion, I return here to Sapphire's *Push*. As Michelle Jarman has noted, the novel's protagonist is "[haunted] by disability," as she must navigate the conjoined forces of "poverty, sexual abuse, illiteracy [...], HIV, and having a daughter with Down Syndrome."²⁶ Precious is the product of relentless abuse; twice raped and impregnated by her father, tormented daily by her mother, and warehoused by educational and social services, she amplifies the violence of patriarchy, white supremacy, and state neglect besieging Black urban communities. And as a crip-of-color critique highlights, *Push* entangles disability with the mechanisms of state violence specific to Reagan-era reform: the insufficient public infrastructures, state agencies, and municipal services that allegedly aim to offer state support but in fact work to reproduce social and material violence.

Sapphire's novel invites an intimacy with state infrastructure that function, in the words of Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman, as the novel's "dramatic core."²⁷ The prominence of "sites of public service: public schools, welfare offices, shelters, hospitals and the like" provoke a readerly attention to state infrastructures that highlights relations of support: the key maneuver of crip-of-color critique.²⁸ A crip-of-color critique, then, primarily operates through an infrastructural hermeneutic: a reading practice that underscores the often-unnoticed networks of assistance—roads, pipes, wires, and labor networks—that coordinate contemporary life, as well as the aesthetics of support and inter/dependency unfolding across feminist-of-color literary and cultural production. At its most basic level, infrastructure refers to the "equipment, facilities, services, and supporting structures needed for a city's or region's functioning."²⁹ On a more

abstract level, it can also refer to public services, such as schools, welfare assistance, and healthcare, as well as invoke informal networks that distribute life-sustaining resources in the absence of formal state support. Either way, infrastructure often eludes our attention; as the editors of the *Modern Fiction Studies* special issue on infrastructuralism put it, “[i]nfrastructure is supposed to go unnoticed when it works.”³⁰ Aesthetic works that then induce “infrastructural avowal,” in the words of performance scholar Shannon Jackson, thus demand “an acknowledgement of the interdependent systems of support that sustain human beings”: systems of support that frequently go disregarded yet remain vital to collective survival.³¹ But infrastructure, too, does not only reference the systems that sustain human life. It also calls to mind the uneven distribution of material resources, in which systems of resource provision optimize life for some while conscripting others to death and disablement.

The plot of *Push* details its teenaged protagonist’s harrowing journey through Harlem’s educational and social welfare systems, highlighting the purposeful failures of public infrastructure and state regulatory agencies at the height of the Reagan era. It opens with a censorious account of New York’s public educational system, which constitutes the initial framework through which readers come to know Precious’s world: “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).”³² These opening lines document the perpetuation of abuse by a system that magnifies patriarchal violence, as well as Precious’s apt assessment of an educational ethos more committed to punishment than care.

A literacy narrative *par exemplar*, *Push* is organized around Precious's acquisition of reading and writing skills despite her sub-par public education, foregrounding both the ineffective state institutions that create illiteracy in under-resourced communities and the informal support systems that arise to address unmet needs. Its narrative arc details the protagonist developing new literacies from her engagement with the actively disabling infrastructures of New York's Harlem, as well as the self-actualizing, "humane, [and] fail-safe communal infrastructures" of Each One Teach One, a community-based adult learning center lead by Black lesbian poet Ms. Rain.³³ Yet, while *Push* condemns the brutality of state institutions, it is also necessary to note that the novel's adoption of the literacy bildungsroman, which imposes upon its protagonist a developmental journey of progress, underscores some of its limitations as a site of radical disability politics. The bildungsroman genre implicitly frames Precious as a character in need of improvement, when in fact she is already a subject of knowledge prior to her acquisition of literacy. As documented in the novel's opening lines and in her reflections on her mother-daughter relationship, Precious is not only attentive to infrastructural violence, but can also identify unexpected alliances with other groups similarly under the thumb of state regulation.

Indeed, the "crip affinity" between Precious and her disabled baby daughter is further explored through the novel's expansive infrastructural tableau.³⁴ Precious's school, for instance, is likened to the horrific state institutions that warehouse disabled people. Just as Precious must attend a school that prioritizes punishment over education, so Mongo, her disabled daughter, is kept in a "retard house" where "she lay on floor in pee clothes."³⁵ Through the paralleling of Precious's life experience with Mongo's, *Push* highlights the ways in which, to cite Cynthia Wu and Jennifer James, the "social, political, and cultural practices" of resource erosion work to

“[keep] seemingly different groups of people in strikingly similar marginalized positions.”³⁶ In Sapphire’s novel, state institutions themselves practice the work of bad mothering, insofar as they reproduce a world incompatible with Black, disabled, and impoverished life.

Push thus renders evident the relationship of disability to anti-welfare rhetoric, as well as the potential for a critical disability politic to intervene into that rhetoric’s operative logics. In terms of disability, it identifies eroding public supports as the cause, rather than the result, of the cultural pathology decried by welfare reformists.³⁷ Precious’s illiteracy and familial trauma are facilitated by inadequate public services, which subsequently foreclose access to social mobility. The dwindling public resources upon which Precious depends produce the signs of inability that then transform into the mythology of the welfare queen. In this way, the novel offers a reversal of the punitive discourse of public dependency that distinguishes between deserving and undeserving subjects. Ostensibly the *reason* for welfare cutbacks, here, dependency is presented as the *result* of capital and state divestment—Precious and her communities are forced to rely on municipal systems unwilling and unable to support them.

In its articulation of counter-narratives of dependency, Sapphire’s novel highlights the third function of a crip-of-color critique: an epistemological project. Indeed, a crip-of-color critique not only highlights the ableist reasoning propping up welfare reform, but also the “ruptural possibilities” engendered through minority cultural and literary expression that call forth other modes of knowing.³⁸ In works like *Push*, dependency is re-envisioned as a site of aesthetic and political potentiality, contesting the fictions of state parasitism authored by Reagan and others.³⁹ The alternative classroom space of Each One Teach One, for instance, offers Precious an informal support network comprised of other young women of color who depend on each other for joy and survival, and who honor each other’s vulnerabilities. And

while Ms. Rain's classroom cannot compensate for the intensifying resource disparities of a Reagan-era New York City, it at least envisions an infrastructural network and ideology of care that intervenes into the calculus of life value determined by welfare reform, insisting upon the inherent worth of Black, brown, poor, queer, and disabled lives. Literary and cultural production—particularly by women- and queers-of-color—thus constitutes a vital site of knowledge and theorization in crip-of-color critique's conceptual armature.

Yet rather than taking a uniformly optimistic view, a crip-of-color critique also recognizes that minority literatures and cultures are not inherently liberatory and can also operate in service of disciplinary norms. The hyperbolic depiction of the welfare queen in *Push*, for instance, potentially re-affirms dominant welfare mythology even as it simultaneously condemns the deadly logics of reform. Further, the literacy bildungsroman as genre mirrors in many ways the curative narratives of anti-welfare policy, which similarly imagined welfare recipients as part of a developmental trajectory, and as pitiable subjects in need of redemption. Given these limitations, while *Push* does partially illustrate the aims of crip-of-color critique, this framework is more fully realized in Ward's *Salvage the Bones*.

Akin to my reading of *Push*, Ward's *Salvage* foregrounds how storylines of dependent subjectivity, articulated through its re-imagining of the welfare mother, can interrupt the logic of disposability that casts racialized and disabled populations as parasitic, unproductive, and without value. Ward's novel suggests that a politics and aesthetics of dependency is not only possible, but necessary for the survival of those populations cast as drains on the state. In this way, *Salvage* furthers a key value of feminist disability scholarship, which has long highlighted the "nested dependencies" that enable collective life.⁴⁰ In the disabling context of infrastructural erosion, *Salvage the Bones* posits *interdependency* as a primary means of mothering a viable

world. Here, survival hinges not upon the achievement of independence, but on the recognition and cultivation of the support networks that enable the characters to endure.

“Everything deserve to live”: Mothering Interdependency in *Salvage the Bones*

Published fifteen years after the passage of major U.S. welfare reform, Ward’s *Salvage the Bones* centrally contends with the punishing legacies and structuring presence of state infrastructural abandonment. Ward’s novel unfolds in the fictional Mississippi Gulf town of Bois Sauvage, documenting the impoverished Batiste family in both their maintenance of everyday life and their preparations for imminent emergency. The emergency in question is Hurricane Katrina, a disaster intensified through a spectacular failure of public infrastructure: the failure of burst levees, emergency prevention, and federal assistance. As the data shows, \$71 million dollars evaporated from the budget of the Army Corps of Engineers in 2005, denying necessary improvements to the city’s levee system.⁴¹ Local, state, and federal emergency response systems collapsed in Katrina’s wake, both unprepared and unwilling to navigate a disaster of such unprecedented scale. And while the connection to the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act may initially seem scant, Katrina’s horrific repercussions, as many have noted, were the culmination of years of assaults on public infrastructural upkeep. “Soon after Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast,” writes educational scholar Henry Giroux, “the consequences of the long legacy of attacking big government and bleeding the social and public sectors of the state became glaringly evident.”⁴² The aftermath of the storm is, in many ways, the outcome of welfare reform’s deadly ideologies.

While New Orleans was the primary backdrop for this drama of state abandonment, Ward’s Bois Sauvage, too, is indelibly shaped by the erosion of public services. There is the

hospital, mentioned repeatedly throughout the novel, that none of the Batistes want to visit; it remains inaccessible for reasons we can only infer. There is the lone phone call from the state government, issued by a man with an “iron throat,” that mandates evacuation using the language of personal responsibility: “*If you choose to stay in your home and have not evacuated by this time, we are not responsible...These are the consequences of your actions.*”⁴³ And there is the “birth in a bare-bulb place,” the title of the first chapter, which refers to both the Batiste homestead named “the Pit,” as well as the work of birthing and mothering that is the novel’s narrative engine. While the Batiste family cobbles together some semblance of protection against the storm, the protagonist, fifteen-year old Esch Batiste, grapples with the knowledge of her unexpected pregnancy. And though *Salvage the Bones* does not engage explicitly with the welfare mother stereotype, it nonetheless centralizes the figure of the Black teen mother, who, according to Ward herself, “continues to loom large in the public consciousness” and provides a mythology of mothering that is “still too useful to some.”⁴⁴

Salvage the Bones, in all of its mythic preoccupation with mothering, suggests that we need new narratives of racialized mothering to navigate an era wrought by infrastructural erosion, in which the most basic structures for sustaining life have quite literally been washed away. Yet, rather than asking the Black women and mothers buried underneath these state-sanctioned myths “to come clean,” to borrow Hortense Spillers’s formulation, Ward’s novel instead counters myth with myth, re-directing myth’s social and often sacred function to produce new systems of thought for a culture bent on punishing its most vulnerable members.⁴⁵ In the face of state brutality, *Salvage the Bones* offers counter-mythologies of mothering in which interdependence constitutes the infrastructure necessary to contest systemic neglect.

Resonant with the 2018 anthology *Revolutionary Mothering: Love on the Front Lines*, originally titled *This Bridge Called My Baby*, here mothering functions not as biological imperative or property relation, but as a repertoire of what anthology editor Alexis Pauline Gumbs terms “transformative bridge-making acts.”⁴⁶ This description enables us to see mothering as a kind of infrastructural labor: the practice of “creating, nurturing, affirming” and above all, “supporting” life.⁴⁷ Returning to the infrastructural hermeneutic of crip-of-color critique, I view the bridge of these “bridge-making acts,” as well as the bridge of the original *This Bridge Called My Back*, as not only metaphors but as infrastructural figures that speak to the crises of state support unfolding in Reagan’s wake. Intervening into the social order reproduced by the welfare queen myth, which leveraged the specter of dependency to argue that some people deserve less than others, *Salvage the Bones* instead mothers a vision of survival that encompasses *all* forms of life. As 16-year old Skeetah Batiste puts it, “Everything deserve to live.”⁴⁸

This vision of survival importantly unfolds as a crip or disability ethos, as it contests the consequences of an ideology of ability while suggesting *interdependency* as a primary mode of survival. Erica Edwards describes the novel’s ethical code as such: “Here, the weak survive, and survival articulates itself as the preservation of collectivity against singularity.”⁴⁹ Similarly, Annie Bares draws upon disability theory to identify the novel’s “rejection of pity or compassion as organizing principles for relationships among characters” in favor of “relationships based on an acknowledgement of mutual dependence.”⁵⁰ Building on Edwards’s and Bares’s insights, I describe this ethos as *crip* because it takes bodily vulnerability as a given, approaching physical and psychological needs as simple matters of fact rather than evidence of pathology. As disability justice activist Patricia Berne puts it, “all bodies have

strengths and needs that must be met,” and, following this, we must “attempt to meet each other’s needs as we build toward liberation.”⁵¹ Through its ethos of interdependency, or “the preservation of collectivity against singularity,” *Salvage the Bones* furthers a crisp vision of reciprocity, sketching out an alternate social order in which vulnerable human and non-human lives mutually enable one another.⁵² Drawing upon the world-making properties of myth, it describes what can or even must arise in the context of state neglect.

This alternate order begins with a myth of creation: the birth in a bare-bulb place. Accordingly, the novel’s chapter structure and titling conventions mimic the Book of Genesis; its plot is spaced out over twelve days that each correspond with a chapter title: “The First Day,” “The Second Day,” and so forth. And for all its unrelenting realism, the novel nonetheless signals its adoption of mythic structures as a means of imagining a habitable world. For instance, Esch Batiste calls upon the myth of Medea, vengeful mother and sorceress, to give narrative form and meaning to her own conundrum of creation: “My stomach sizzles sickly, so I pull my book from the corner of my bed where it’s smashed between the wall and my mattress. In *Mythology*, I am still reading about Medea and the quest for the Golden Fleece. Here is someone I recognize...I know her.”⁵³ Upon Medea’s ancient stage, Esch plays out the events of her own life, a practice that is a primary means of psychic survival.

Myths, according to Patricia Yaeger, function as this kind of social blueprint, as they “establish long-term models for guiding behavior.”⁵⁴ They require, first, mystery; second, a topos, or “an explication of cosmic shape”; third, an epistemology; and fourth, an “ethic—a set of rules or maxims about how to live within the parameters of the everyday.”⁵⁵ The birth in a bare-bulb place, then, outlines the cosmic shape of the world that the Batistes both inhabit and endure. The Pit, as Esch describes it, is the bare-bulb place, which refers both to its primary

source of light—the bare-bulb—and to the bare essentials of formal support and power to which the Batistes have access. The birth references two separate but interconnected events: the past memory of Esch’s mother dying in childbirth, illuminated by the bare bulb; and the present event of China, Skeetah Batiste’s prized pitbull, giving birth to puppies. It also foreshadows the anticipated birth of Esch’s child who she carries in secret.

Like *Push*, the birth in a bare-bulb place entangles infrastructural violence with the phantom of deviant mothering, layering the self-obliterating labor of giving life with the grid of electric power: “Mama had all of us in her bed, under her own bare burning bulb, so when it was time for Junior, she thought she could do the same. It didn’t work out that way.”⁵⁶ The bulb also figures into China’s own violent experience with birthing: “What China is doing is fighting, like she was born to do. Fight our shoes, fight other dogs, fight these puppies that are reaching for the outside, blind and wet...It’s quiet. Heavy. Feels like it should be raining, but it isn’t. There are no stars, and the bare bulbs of the Pit burn.”⁵⁷ This scene of birth twinned with death, of worlds both made and unmade, re-formats another iconic scene of power and creation: the subterranean light-installation that bookends Ralph Ellison’s novel *Invisible Man* (1952). Viewing himself as part of “the great American tradition of tinkers,” which include Thomas Edison and Benjamin Franklin, Ellison’s protagonist famously gives life to “1,369” light bulbs powered by stolen electricity.⁵⁸ His seizing of the grid is not a purely aesthetic move, but rather, signifies an attempt to effect social change. As a tinker and inventor, the Invisible Man signals the need to create the world anew through the radical re-direction of light and power.⁵⁹

In *Salvage the Bones*, the burning bulb similarly draws upon electricity’s transformative properties. It illuminates another possible horizon for organizing social life, one that redraws the boundaries of the individual self and its claims to bodily wholeness. We see, for instance, how

the birthing process both undoes and exceeds the self, transforming the bodies of Mama and China, the pit-bull: “[S]he seems to be turning herself inside out...China is blooming.”⁶⁰ In pregnancy, as Lily Gurton-Wachter has written, “the distinction you once knew between self and other comes undone.”⁶¹ Pregnancy, too, describes a system of interdependent relations; the fetus and the pregnant person are linked, if only temporarily, in their bids for survival. And while pregnancy and disability are not one and the same, they nonetheless both name categories of being that highlight the inherent changeability and porosity of bodies, thus aligning this origin myth with the novel’s crip ethos. “Disability,” according to feminist disability scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, “invites us to query what the continuity of the self might depend upon if the body perpetually metamorphoses,” and in so doing, critiques the “normalizing phallic fantasies of wholeness, unity, coherence, and completeness.”⁶² Akin to disability activism and theory, the myth of the burning bulb takes the vulnerable, fractured, and changeable body as a *given*, placing it at the center of the novel’s alternate social order. In this way, the burning-bulb narrative demonstrates the world-making properties of dependency and vulnerability, insofar as it describes a cosmos generated *from*, rather than *despite*, embodied fragility.

The opening scene further undoes the differential worth assigned to human and non-human subjects, as it throws into question the hierarchies of life that value some forms of existence above others. This becomes evident in the mirroring language used to describe China and Mama Batiste, which, rather than reducing Mama to the status of animal, underscores the connection between two beings whose reproduction is similarly framed as a societal threat. And animals, rather than occupying a lesser or subordinate position, co-exist with their human companions in a mutual interrelation of need. “[S]ome people,” Skeetah Batiste observes,

“understand that between man and dog is a relationship. Equal.”⁶³ Though *Salvage the Bones* articulates this vision of interspecies reciprocity throughout its pages, the opening scene sets the stage for this ethos of interdependence, as it highlights the all-encompassing love between Skeetah Batiste, Esch’s older brother, and China, his pit-bull. Waiting for China to give birth, Skeetah sleeps with her nightly in the shed, “curled around China like a fingernail around flesh.”⁶⁴ And just as China provides Skeetah with saleable puppies and companionship, so Skeetah devotes himself to their survival in a world bent on their undoing: “They’re going to live, and they’re going to be big.”⁶⁵ Rather than making appeals to self-ownership and independence, then, the novel’s bare bulb sheds light upon a world in which human and non-human life form an informal structure of support, generating an interspecies network of assistance in which the most vulnerable lifeforms might (yet often do not) endure.

And then there is the bare-bulb itself, which as a recurring image of power and provision sketches its own mythology of mothering, survival, and creation. At its most surface level, the bare bulb signals the poverty of the Batiste homestead, who get by largely through the work of salvaging: auto parts, wood scraps, flooring, and so forth. It also depicts, with swiftness and economy, the regime of resource deprivation that intensified Katrina’s destruction. Yet the bulb signals more than just infrastructural violence, it also accompanies, again and again, the acts and figures of deviant mothering upon which the novel turns. *Salvage the Bones* describes China, one of the novel’s many mothers, as “burning bright,” “so bright it is hard to look at her.”⁶⁶ Like the bare bulb, China is fragile, vulnerable, yet in all of her vulnerability, exudes a paradoxical kind of power. When Manny, Esch’s romantic interest, suggests to Skeetah that China, as recent mother, is too weak to fight, Skeetah replies: “You serious? That’s when they come into they strength. They got something to protect...That’s power...To give life...is to

know what's worth fighting for."⁶⁷ The bare bulb and China both convey a myth of mothering in which power paradoxically hinges upon fragility. Both can only burn so brightly *because* of their fragility, thus remapping the terrain of what power is or can be. Mothering, then, also taps into the epistemic registers of myth—that is, mothering as a means of knowing power differently, and as a system of thought that frames seemingly expendable life as “worth fighting for.”⁶⁸

But the labor of mothering a *habitable* world, as *Salvage the Bones* suggests, must go beyond a myth of creation. It also requires a myth of destruction, or of *unmaking* a world incompatible with Black life. Enter Hurricane Katrina, recast in Ward's imagination as “the mother who swept into the Gulf and slaughtered.”⁶⁹ For many of us, Katrina is synonymous with slaughter, a force that dealt death along raced and classed lines. But when readers come to know Katrina as *mother*, a word that also signals the work of transformation, she becomes Oya, the Yoruban goddess of storms, winds, and change. According to Luisah Teish, one of the original contributors to *This Bridge Called My Back*, Oya “brings sudden structural change in people and things. [She] does not just rearrange the furniture in the house—she knocks the building to the ground and blows away the floor tiles.”⁷⁰ And so, while Katrina makes short work of the Batiste homestead, she also washes away the “yacht club, and all the white-columned homes that faced the beach, that made us feel small and dirty and poorer than ever.”⁷¹ She destroys the material emblems of a social system that reproduces poverty for families like the Batistes. Both types of property, once unequal in value, are now leveled and wiped clean, a necessary prerequisite for mothering something new altogether.

Katrina, in all her destruction, nonetheless generates a possible future for the residents of Bois Sauvage. Significantly, she spares the Batistes and their neighboring friends and family. In

Ward's imaginary, she is "the murderous mother who cut us to the bone *but left us alive*...She left us to learn to crawl. She left us to salvage."⁷² Katrina as mythic mother thus promotes a vision of survival above all: the final chapter, in which Katrina retreats, bears the title "Alive." What's more, she gestures toward the survival of Black and economically distressed communities abandoned by the state. In this way, Ward's novel reverses a dominant narrative of Katrina that transformed the *survivors* of the hurricane into looters and criminals through rhetorics of personal responsibility. By framing the residents of Bois Sauvage as *survivors*, and by generating myths that can mother survival, *Salvage the Bones* intervenes into a calculus of life value that insists on the expendability of some in order to support the rest. It generates the possibility of a world in which hierarchies of life no longer hold traction, whether determined by race, ability, or species.

This vision of survival, articulated through a counter-mythology of mothering, is pointedly not the survival of the fittest (as in those with economic, racial, and able-bodied privilege), but survival of the most vulnerable. In the Pit, the vulnerable are left alive, and survival is the product of mutual support and reciprocity, rather than self-preservation. The novel thus conceptualizes survival as an insistence on care as a collective project, and a project that emerges through the interlocking efforts of many dependent life-forms. This is a vision contingent upon the interdependence of beings, one that honors the infrastructures of care and support cultivated by Bois Sauvage.

This vision of survival is perhaps most fully articulated in the closing scene. The storm has receded, and Skeetah has begun his search for China, who was carried away by Katrina—the devouring of one mother by another. Esch's language shifts into the future tense:

“We will sit with [Skeetah] here... We will sit until we are sleepy...until Junior falls asleep in Randall’s arms, his weak neck lolling off Randall’s elbow. Randall will watch Junior and Big Henry will watch me and I will watch Skeetah, and Skeetah will watch none of us...He will look into the future and see her emerge into the circle of his fire....dull but alive, alive, alive [...] *China*. She will return...[S]he will know that I have kept watch, that I have fought. China will bark and call me sister...She will know that I am a mother.”⁷³

Here, Ward describes a vision of China’s return that can only manifest through the collective efforts of the Batiste siblings and their friend, Big Henry. This manifestation of “will,” the operative term of the future tense, assumes the form of a human chain, an infrastructural network of support that links bodies and futures together. Esch’s usage of the future tense, a means of “willing” China back into the world, intervenes into narratives of expendability in order to insist upon the survival of racialized, disabled, and impoverished populations. Her usage of “will” is a mode of production toward a social world that does not yet exist; a world in which China is written back into existence and recognizes Esch as mother. Here arises the final myth of mothering, a myth in which one becomes a mother through the labor of keeping watch, of fighting, of surviving. A myth in which one is not born, but becomes a mother through infrastructural labor, which can build a bridge from the ruins of Bois Sauvage to another mode of social life. This is, above all, a myth of radical mothering that insists upon the recuperation of dependency and the recognition of shared vulnerability as a primary mode of survival, and as a means of generating a possible future for lives that survive against all odds: “*Tomorrow*,” Esch thinks, “*everything will be washed clean*. What I carry in my stomach is relentless; like each unbearable day, it will dawn.”⁷⁴

CONCLUSION

The crip ethos and vision derived from Ward's *Salvage the Bones* encapsulates, in many ways, the framework I have termed a crip-of-color critique. *Salvage* articulates a system of values that 1) honors the vulnerability and dependency of living creatures as well as their differing needs for support; 2) divests from the hierarchies of race, species, and ability underlying the uneven distribution of resources; 3) underscores the disabling brutality of state divestment; and 4) envisions alternate modes of sociality organized around care for other living beings, regardless of blood relation or similarity to the self. And while disability does haunt Ward's novel with its scenes of scarring, mutilation, sickness, and dismemberment, a crip-of-color critique is less interested in disability as a set of identifiable diagnoses, and more invested in disability as an analytic for thinking across landscapes of racialized state neglect.

A crip-of-color critique thus demonstrates the utility of a disability politic in overturning the punitive ideologies of welfare reform. Not only does it foreground the ableism undergirding state discourses of dependency, it also challenges and overwrites these dominant narratives. Under the terms of this framework, the recuperation of dependency emerges as a key political project, a tactic that upholds the survival against-all-odds of a "disruptive vulnerability that refuses to disappear."⁷⁵ Further, in taking dependency as a given, a crip-of-color critique offers an infrastructural hermeneutic that reads for relations of support, whether social, material, or prosthetic. Yet, rather than uncritically celebrating infrastructure, this framework also attends to the asymmetries of support relations, paying attention to how white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, ableism, and capitalism determine uneven economies of resource provision. Finally, a crip-of-color critique also recognizes the limitations inherent in a utopian discourse of

interdependence that, in highlighting networks of informal care, potentially further erodes state accountability by suggesting that vulnerable populations can and should support themselves. Even in *Push* and *Salvage*, the informal networks that arise in the absence of infrastructure are still not enough: Precious may gain literacy and Esch may survive the storm, but their futures nonetheless remain circumscribed by material deprivation. And so, while a crip-of-color critique explores the political potential of interdependence, it does not frame this value as a cure-all for contemporary crises of care.

Given the association of racial and gendered deviance with state parasitism and the subsequent erosion of social safety nets, a crip-of-color critique argues for the reconsideration of dependency as a crucial step toward addressing disabling structures of state neglect. And in crippling the welfare queen, it forges an alliance between anti-racist, anti-capitalist, and feminist disability politics, one modeled, if imperfectly, by the relationship between Precious and her baby daughter, Lil Mongo. In this way, a crip-of-color critique speaks to the “radical potential” outlined in “Bulldaggers, Punks, and Welfare Queens,” through which Cohen envisions a politics in which “one’s relation to power, and not some homogenized identity, is privileged in determining one’s political comrades.”⁷⁶ Only by recognizing the links between the marginalization of welfare queens and their disabled kin can we develop critical analytics that can “[confront] the linked yet varied sites of power in this country.”⁷⁷

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Notes

¹ Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens," 438. In addition to Cohen's article, some key examples of feminist scholarship intervening into anti-welfare discourses of Black mothering include Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, Ange-Marie Hancock, *The Politics of Disgust*, and Wahneema Lubiano, "Black Ladies, Welfare Queens, and State Minstrels."

² Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens," 438.

³ Sapphire, *Push*, 34.

⁴ Michelle Jarman first noted the connection between Sapphire's *Push* and disability politics in the article "Cultural Consumption and Rejection of Precious Jones: Pushing Disability into the Discussion of Sapphire's *Push* and Lee Daniels's *Precious*."

⁵ Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black*, 26.

⁶ Lubiano, "Black Ladies, Welfare Queens, and State Minstrels," 331.

⁷ Schram, *After Welfare*, 59.

⁸ Gumbs, *We Can Learn to Mother Ourselves*, 206. See Singer, *Erotic Warfare: Sexual Theory and Politics in the Age of Epidemic*.

⁹ Gumbs, *We Can Learn to Mother Ourselves*, 207.

¹⁰ Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens,” 440.

¹¹ Berne, “Disability Justice.”

¹² While my focus here is on welfare reform and state divestment, other scholars have analyzed the centrality of ableist logic to other forms of state violence such as police brutality, the prison-industrial complex, and public education. For more on disability and the prison industrial complex, see *Disability Incarcerated* and Andrea Ritchie’s “Policing (Dis)Ability” in *Invisible No More*. For more on disability and US public education, see Nirmala Erevelles’s “Educating Unruly Bodies” and Subini Annamma’s *The Pedagogy of Pathologization*.

¹³ Sandahl, “Queering the Crip,” 37.

¹⁴ Minich, “Enabling Whom.”

¹⁵ Fraser and Gordon, “A Genealogy of Dependency,” 332.

¹⁶ Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*, 145.

¹⁷For examples of disability justice discussions of interdependence, see Eli Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure*; Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice*; Patricia Berne, Aurora Levins Morales, David Langstaff and Sins Invalid, “10 Principles of Disability Justice”; and Mia Mingus, “Interdependency (excerpts from several talks).”

¹⁸ Mingus, *Leaving Evidence*.

¹⁹ Hong and Ferguson, “Introduction,” 1-2.

²⁰ Hong and Ferguson, “Introduction,” 2.

²¹ Frye, *Birthing Disability*, 100.

²² Davidson, “Universal Design,” 118.

²³ See Dean Spade, *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law*.

²⁴ See Samuel Bagenstos, “The Americans With Disabilities Act as Welfare Reform.”

²⁵ Puar, “Coda,” 154.

²⁶ Jarman, “Cultural Consumption and Rejection of Precious Jones,” 164.

²⁷ Abdur-Rahman, *Against the Closet*, 133.

²⁸ Abdur-Rahman, *Against the Closet*, 133.

²⁹ Yaeger, “Dreaming,” 15.

³⁰ Rubenstein, Robbins, and Beal, “Infrastructuralism,” 576.

³¹ Jackson, *Social Works*, 8; Jackson, “Working Publics,” 10.

³² Sapphire, *Push*, 1.

³³ Abdur-Rahman, *Against the Closet*, 133.

³⁴ Frye, *Birthing Disability*, 100.

³⁵ Sapphire, *Push*, 132.

³⁶ James and Wu, “Editors’ Introduction,” 4.

³⁷ In addition to Moynihan’s infamous 1965 report, the work of anti-welfare pundits Charles Murray and Lawrence Mead also forwards cultural/ behavioral explanations for racialized poverty.

³⁸ Ferguson, *Aberrations*, 26.

³⁹ For more on the discourse of dependency in pre- and post-industrial contexts, see Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon, “A Genealogy of Dependency: Tracing a Keyword of the U.S. Welfare State.”

⁴⁰ Kittay, *Love’s Labor*, 141.

⁴¹ See Mtangulizi Sanyika, “Katrina and the Condition of Black New Orleans: The Struggle for Justice, Equity, and Democracy.”

⁴² Giroux, “Reading Hurricane Katrina,” 174.

⁴³ Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 217.

⁴⁴ Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 265.

⁴⁵ Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 65.

⁴⁶ Gumbs, “Introduction,” 9.

⁴⁷ Gumbs, “Introduction,” 9.

⁴⁸ Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 213.

⁴⁹ Edwards, “Sex After the Black Normal,” 158.

⁵⁰ Bares, “Each Unbearable Day,” 32.

⁵¹ Berne, “Disability Justice—A Working Draft”; Berne, “10 Principles of Disability Justice,” 228.

⁵² Edwards, “Sex After the Black Normal,” 158.

⁵³ Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 38.

⁵⁴ Yaeger, “Beasts.”

⁵⁵ Yaeger, "Beasts."

⁵⁶ Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 2.

⁵⁷ Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 2.

⁵⁸ Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 7.

⁵⁹ For more on the trope of electricity in *Invisible Man*, see Douglas Ford, "Crossroads and Cross-Currents in *Invisible Man*."

⁶⁰ Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 4.

⁶¹ Gurton-Wachter, "The Stranger Guest."

⁶² Garland-Thomson, "Integrating Disability," 20, 28.

⁶³ Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 29.

⁶⁴ Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 3.

⁶⁵ Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 21.

⁶⁶ Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 103, 168.

⁶⁷ Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 96.

⁶⁸ Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 96.

⁶⁹ Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 255.

⁷⁰ Teish, *Jambalaya*, 120.

⁷¹ Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 252.

⁷² Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 255, emphasis mine.

⁷³ Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 258.

⁷⁴ Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 205.

⁷⁵ Erevelles, "Thinking with Disability Studies."

⁷⁶ Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens," 438.

⁷⁷ Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens," 482.