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*(Crip)walking On Water*  
**an analysis of the extraordinary body in  
postmodern Black men's fiction**

**Joshua Bennett**

2009–2010 Penn Humanities Forum  
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*(Crip)walking On Water: an analysis of the extraordinary body in postmodern Black men's fiction*

Simply put, from the beginnings of the United States, the claim that "Blackness is like disability" was not used as an expression of how Black Americans suffered but as a tool of their oppression... The very fact of blackness was regarded as a deformity or disability, even by white Americans sympathetic to the cause of civic equality... These associations naturally influenced Black writers' priorities: [Jennifer] James argues that in "post-Civil War African American literature particularly, it was imperative that the black body and the black mind be portrayed as uninjured . . . in order to disprove one of the main anti-black arguments that surfaced after emancipation—that slavery had made blacks 'unfit' for citizenship."

- Dr. Joshua Lukin , *Black Disability Studies*

Growing up, my parents spoke of Muhammad Ali as if he had wings. A man of truly mythic proportions, I learned his story through hyperbolic tales of ring dominance and effortless charisma, of fists and feet so quick they made the wind jealous. A peerless elocutionist wrapped in the body of a gladiator, the fighter was in my mind the ideal role model: the perfect man. In recent years however, I have come to realize that the lionized star athlete of my childhood was a distant memory for my parents, an idealized fiction. The Ali that no one dared show me back then was a man with Parkinson's disease, a condition that took away his incredible speed and made his mortality painfully evident to all those who once doubted he would, or could, ever stop moving. When I speak to my parents now about Ali, most times their reaction is one of thinly veiled longing for their hero of old to return. His once supremely able body now forever altered, my mother and father simply don't seem to know what to do with him now; how to reconcile the fighter's disability with the indefatigable African American male identity he came to represent for so many.

I invoke this narrative to introduce an under-researched question within the realms of African American Studies and disability studies: what does the presence of disabled men of African descent do to the way we write, talk and think about Black

masculinity? In particular, I am interested in the ways in which nondisabled Black male authors take up, play with, and ultimately expand upon disability as a theme in their work. Within the African American literary canon, there are relatively few texts which feature visibly disabled characters as protagonists,<sup>1</sup> and even fewer that deal centrally with the struggles, triumphs and everyday experiences of disabled men (think here of novels such as *Sula*, *Kindred* and *Beloved* that prominently feature disabled Black female characters but contain little to no mention of males with disabilities at all). Of the handful of Black novelists who include disabled characters in their work, Paul Beatty stands out as a figure whose past books have focused intently on the complications inherent to being a disabled Black man in the cultural (con)text of the contemporary United States.

Specifically, Beatty's second novel, *Tuff*, is one that features physically disabled main characters whose performance of Black masculine identity serves to render impotent prevailing notions about Black male hypermasculinity, athleticism, intelligence, and cool. The protagonist, Fariq Cole, de-familiarizes the Black male body through not only the reality of his corporeal deviance, but also the ways in which he challenges social expectations of what such bodies can and should do. In the process, Fariq, and the text as a whole, serves to destabilize the static, reductive lens through which Black male identity is so often constructed and make a case for a new, more expansive conception of Black masculinity, one that includes the extraordinary bodies that have been ignored for far too long.

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<sup>1</sup> Though a similar critique can clearly be made of the Western literary canon as a whole, I am most concerned here with the invisibility of disabled Black men and women within narratives that purport to reflect the individual and communal experiences of their racial group.

Along with Beatty, I am also interested in the ways that other nondisabled Black male writers and performers take up disabled Black men as characters within their fictional work. Of particular appeal here is MF Doom, a contemporary hip-hop artist who not only writes all of his rhymes from the perspective of a physically disfigured Black man, but also goes as far as to perform this identity onstage during his live shows.<sup>2</sup> Much like *Tuff*, Doom's fascinating oeuvre places the disabled Black male body front and center, and in the process illuminates new, untapped possibilities for the ways in which his interlocutors can imagine Black male gender performance. A move that is made all the more interesting by its presence within a hip-hop culture industry which so often demands that its participants represent a very specific model of male identity, Doom's dedication to rapping about corporeal otherness frees him up to do radically progressive intellectual work through his music, utilizing tools akin to those of his rap contemporaries for a radically different discursive and political purpose, one rooted not in the seemingly ever-present notion of "keeping it real", but quite the opposite. Doom, like Beatty, actually seems far more interested in the idea of keeping it unreal, presenting fictional narratives that transgress the boundaries of what have been traditionally considered "authentic" portrayals of the Black male experience.

I am fundamentally interested in the conversation going on between these two authors; in excavating from their texts representations of disabled Black men that destroy

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<sup>2</sup> From here on in, I am reading the presence of Doom's mask as a performance of disfigurement in and of itself, a signifier that does the double-duty of not only covering his face, but also uncovering the problematic limitations so often placed on hip-hop performers, and live performance artists writ-large.

old paradigms, and usher us all toward a more open-ended vision of masculinity which allows for a wider range of identities to be recognized. In this paper, I argue that both Beatty and Doom, through a number of disparate rhetorical and literary strategies, offer their readers main characters that challenge social expectations along the lines of race, gender, and ability. What is created is an entirely different mode of masculinity that exists in dynamic tension with the “cool pose”<sup>3</sup>, that consciously performed veneer of invincibility so frequently attributed to iconic Black male figures such as the aforementioned Muhammad Ali. In opposition to, and in conversation with, this restrictive script I believe that Beatty and Doom offers a new option all together, one with far more potential to radically alter popular perceptions of those extraordinary bodies on the margins: the (crip)walk.

Here, it is critical that I explain exactly what I mean by *disability*, a term that I have already deployed numerous times with little explanation as to what I intend in its use. For the purposes of this paper, I will be employing the rhizomatic model of disability, as I find it to be the most robust of the existing models, as well as the most effective for what it is that I intend to argue herein. For a brief explanation of this theory, I will briefly defer here to Petra Kuppers:

In the social model, disability is a category that is extrinsic to specific bodily being: a wheelchair user becomes disabled when she encounters a stairwell. And she can embrace the label as a sign of shared oppression, identification across a social position. In the medical model, disability is intrinsic: this body is disabled, faulty, in need of being (and potentially able to be) cured, managed, rehabilitated. I propose a rhizomatic model of disability, already a *model*, slanted,

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Majors and Janet Billson provide a helpful working definition of Cool Pose in their seminal mid-90’s text of the same name: “Cool pose is a ritualized form of masculinity that entails behaviors, scripts, physical posturing, impression management, and carefully crafted performances that deliver a single, critical message: pride, strength and control” (4).

quoted, rather than a mode of experience... The rhizomatic model of disability produces an abundance of meanings that do not juxtapose pain and pleasure or pride and shame, but allow for an immanent transformation, a coming into being of a state of life in this world, one that is constantly shifting and productive of new subject/individual positions (Kuppers 225-226).

I imagine Kuppers' model as a robust addendum to, and reconstruction of, existing models of disability, one that accounts not only for the ways in which disability itself is a socially constructed stigma, but that also acknowledges the very real consequences that emerge for those whose bodies fit (a term I use rather ironically here given that the study of disability is centrally concerned with bodies that do not "fit" according to traditional conceptions of the body) into said category. The rhizomatic model is therefore particularly useful for my agenda of bringing the study of disability into the realm of African American Studies, a meta-discipline with a storied historical investment in the everyday life experiences of marginalized peoples.

Thus, I am unflinchingly committed to thinking about and through disability within the course of this paper as an identity category not meant to project any sort of inherently negative, intrinsically limiting cultural meaning onto the various characters meandering through the subsequent pages. Hopefully, the rhizomatic model can be a lens through which even as I write, I complicate my own understandings of the potential work being done by these characters as reflections of disabled folks in the material world. Though these various figures may be fictional, they nonetheless serve as powerful representations of Black disabled men, and as such are critically important in a discussion about challenging real-world perceptions of the corporeally deviant.

Arguably, the most effective theoretical framework for such a slippery, multifaceted project would be one which incorporated a number of disparate ideas, one



equipped with the tools needed to identify and support any sort of common tie between these divergent figures. In my search for minds equipped to undertake such an endeavor, I came upon the work of both Ato Quayson and Daphne Brooks. While the former is a disability studies theorist in the more traditional sense (whatever the term “traditional” can truly signify for a nascent subfield such as disability studies) Daphne Brooks’ most recent tome, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910*, nonetheless offers its readers a number of fresh, creative lenses through which to critique representations of disability in literature and beyond. Specifically, for this paper I will be borrowing Brooks’ theory of “afro-alienation” as well as Quayson’s recent scholarly in(ter)vention, “aesthetic nervousness”.

Though these two frameworks are quite disparate in terms of how they are used by Brooks and Quayson respectively (“afro-alienation” is a performance studies term while “aesthetic nervousness” is meant to describe the way a text reacts to the presence of certain characters) the space in which their overlap takes place is nonetheless a fruitful one for a discussion of not only how both characters and texts perform, but in fact also what the role of literature can/could/will be in re-thinking gender, race, and disability performance in the real world. Brooks describes “afro-alienation” as follows:

“Afro alienation acts invoke largely anti-realist forms of cultural expression in order to call attention to the hegemony of identity categories. This strategy also provides a fruitful terrain for marginalized figures to experiment with culturally innovative ways to critique and to disassemble the condition of oppression. Generically diverse and dissident, Afro-alienation acts draw from the tactics of heterogeneous performance strategies...in order to defamiliarize the spectacle of “blackness”...Spectacularly eccentric, [these] characters...imagined and stylized ways to make their subjugated bodies move more freely... and to be culturally “odd,” to turn the tables on normativity and to employ their own bodies and canvases of dissent” (Brooks 6).

Interestingly enough, Brooks’ reading here of 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century transatlantic Black performers is particularly useful to this project not only for all that it

includes, but also what it appears to omit: those bodies constructed as deviant without the need for subversive performance. For my purposes, I am not so much arguing that Fariq and Doom are rendering themselves “odd” as much as they are rendered “odd” by the gaze of a majority-nondisabled society. What they do with this “oddness” is the matter of paramount importance, how they de-familiarize the “spectacle of blackness” not only through their presence in these various works, but also how the various performance strategies they use at any given moment in a text call into question many prevailing perceptions of disability.

The characters I am interested in interrogating are those whose bodies have always been “canvases of dissent,” and as such have lying within their collective and individual experiences powerful testaments to the importance of thinking about race, disability and performance in concert with one another. Though there are a number of different micro-strategies at play regarding the ways in which this trio of terms are being teased out by Doom and Fariq, at the core of this project lies a fundamental desire to unpack how the three find a shared home in the (crip)walk, gelling in a manner that provides for singular moments of disruption in regard to the status quo. How do these men disassemble disability as an identity category marked by debility, weakness or a lack of mobility? When?

Quayson’s theory of “aesthetic nervousness”, though very different from Brooks’ “afro-alienation” in regard to both medium and time, nonetheless seems to complement certain aspects of her claims about the ways in which the presence and performance marginalized identity affect those who come encounter it:

“Aesthetic nervousness is seen when the dominant protocols of representation within the literary text are short-circuited in relation to disability. The primary level at which it may be discerned is in the interaction between a disabled and nondisabled character... [it is also]...augmented by tensions refracted across other levels of the text such as the disposition of symbols and motifs, the overall narrative or dramatic perspective, the constitution and reversals of plot structure...The final dimension...is that between the reader and the text. As I shall show...in works where disability plays a prominent role, the reader’s perspective is also affected by the short-circuiting of the dominant protocols governing the text—a short-circuit triggered by the representation of disability” (Quayson 15).

What is most relevant to my discussion of *Tuff* and MF Doom via Quayson is his claim that the very presence of disability in a text has the power to “short-circuit” it, a term that is particularly effective for my purposes because of the playfulness inherent in its use. In the most basic sense, a “short-circuit” can be viewed as the malfunctioning or failing of a device, the instant where a machine can no longer perform the role it was originally intended to perform. That Quayson casts disabled figures, inhabitants of bodies that have effectively short-circuited in regard to many of the social roles that post/modern bodies have ascribed to and for them (clearly including, but not limited to the sports arena, corporate workplace, etc.), as sources of disruptions rather than as unwitting agents in a sort of divine/biological disruption of the normative corporeal form, is a move that opens up the door for the particular critiques I am interested in making throughout *(Crip)walking on water*. The short-circuiting Quayson talks about is seen throughout the analysis contained herein, and is a critical link between Doom and Fariq. Both figures short-circuit the conventions of their medium (the literary text and the performance-as-text respectively) through their very presence, offering a direct challenge to the invisibility of visibly disabled bodies that is so often taken for granted in the realm of African American cultural production.

The (crip)walk as I imagine it is a hybrid performative mode born from the strange union of Quayson and Brooks’ theories, an approach to thinking about not only

how these various texts play out in regard to plot and narrative structure, but also the numerous ways that individual characters quite literally *move* throughout the text. How do these various figures navigate space, relationships, identity? What role do their respective disabilities play in how they are received and reacted to by their nondisabled counterparts? Fundamentally, what kind of subversive potential does the (crip)walk have in a national and global culture obsessed with policing the *mobility* of those confined to the various social scripts that come with being read as a Black, disabled man?

I approach these questions the way that one approaches a sleeping giant, or, perhaps more germane to this discussion, a championship fighter: with a curious mix of respect and wonder. Clearly, any attempt to define, pin down, or restrain the very bodies and souls that this paper is interested in interrogating, recuperating, and eventually re-imagining would be a misguided endeavor. I recognize that I am a creature fundamentally limited by the strictures of language, unable to craft a term devoid of the painful past. Therefore, instead of claiming that all of these authors and characters are engaging in identical acts of subversive performance, I would like to posit instead that they are each contributing undeniably fresh, unexpected ingredients to the mix. The readings contained herein therefore are not centrally concerned with how the movements of Fariq, Doom, and Reuben are similar, but rather with how each of them add yet another step to the textual choreography I am arguing is taking place here, in the process both creating and continuing a genealogy of trans-genre, trans-temporal Black male performance that undoes many of the lingering opinions about who should be included in the conversation on masculinity and race.

What hopefully emerges is a new theoretical approach to reading disabled characters in African American literature, one that accounts not only for the presence of these figures, but that also acknowledges the ways in which their deployment in the texts they inhabit differs from how disabled figures have been, and continue to be, utilized in literary works. Though these characters clearly re-inscribe certain normative hierarchies (all of them being heterosexual males, example) they also force us into a new approach to reading. The protagonists in question require us to release all previous knowledge of how bodies can, and should ambulate throughout a narrative, how narratives themselves should move. These texts mandate that their readers step out on faith, believing that they, like the characters themselves, can defy the expected, can (crip)walk on water.

### Section 1: Chasing Fariq

“Yet the most radical project of disability studies is not only to show how deeply disability is woven into our shared cultural fabric, but also to offer ways forward, towards aesthetics that do not merely reproduce any master’s voice, but that show the beauty in the irregular, the pied, aesthetics that willfully play with language’s location on the limits of personal embodiment and social construction.” – Petra Kupperts, *Auto-Graphen* or ‘The Blind Man’s Pencil’: Notes on the Making of a Poem

From the very beginning of *Tuff*, it is made abundantly clear that Paul Beatty’s novel is one interested in not only recuperating the corporeally deviant Black male body, but also in a larger project of taking various stereotypes of urban youth of color and turning them on their heads. A text that begins with its protagonist, Winston “Tuffy” Foshay awakening in a Brooklyn drug den next to his best friend, Fariq, caressing “the bullet hole that had smashed his nose into a shock-white dimple of crushed glass and thought” (Beatty 3), *Tuff* appears at first glance to be yet another narrative detailing the plight of young Black men who have had no choice to turn to a life of crime in a post-industrial urban society devoid of resources but filled with opportunities for trouble. The

characters, as they are initially presented, lend themselves to such a reading. In the two-man drug running operation Beatty uses to introduce the reader to his two main characters, Winston is essentially cast as the “tough guy” of the tandem (hence his nickname, Tuffy) and Fariq as the smooth-talking brains of the operation: “Winston and Fariq had known each other since the subway cost seventy-five cents. Fariq was an enterprising shyster who dragged Winston, the muscle, along on his moneymaking schemes, the first of which was a dognapping operation so immense it required ...every rooftop pigeon coop on 109<sup>th</sup> Street ...for kennel space” (Beatty 9).

What on the surface appears to be a harmless story of childhood entrepreneurship is imbued with new meaning as Beatty goes into much fuller descriptions of both Fariq and Winston over the course of the novel. It soon comes to the reader’s attention that Fariq, for example, has a number of physical disabilities, a fact that is introduced at length as Beatty describes the look and feel of the drug spot which serves as the reader’s introduction to *Tuff’s* imaginary New York City landscape:

Fariq...hobbled into the living room, his crutches splayed out to the side, propelling him forward...Each herky-jerk step undulated [his] body toward Winston like a Slinky, alternately coiling and uncoiling. Fariq was the coolest of the many cool handicapped East Harlemites... Despite the soft spot in his head where his skull had never fused, it’d been a long time since he’d worn a cyclist’s helmet. The bill of his fiberglass-reinforced Yankee baseball cap hung over his left eye, shadowing the surgical scars. The baggy corduroys covered up his leg braces. His clubfeet...squeezed into a pair of expensive sneakers, though he’d never run a step in his life (Beatty 9).

In this portion of the text, Beatty places the disabled Black male body front and center. Rather than casting Fariq as a secondary character undeserving of narrative attention, the text instead forces the reader to engage his disability head on, to not only deal with the reality of his deviant body, but to trouble the way he seems to imagine himself based on the description. Beatty’s commentary on Fariq’s appearance would have us believe that

much of his sartorial performance is a vanishing act of sorts, a literal means of covering up his physical hypertrophy through the use of the baggy clothing. At the same time, however, Beatty seems to be exploring the beauty to be found in the uniqueness of the way that Fariq moves through urban space. This is undeniably a moment where the (crip)walk comes into play in a very palpable sense; the text is not only short-circuited in that the author is forced to take the time to expound upon that which is normally taken for granted (the way a particular character walks), but Fariq's movements themselves also do the work of de-familiarizing the black male body as it usually constructed within the geo-spatial imagination. In her article "Mobility Disability" Celeste Langan makes a compelling argument regarding the importance of challenging reductive conceptions of bodily movement:

In "Energy and Equity," Ilich (1978: 138) erroneously asserts that "people are born almost equally mobile." Disability scholars have not only made us sensitive to the error of this assertion and to the fact of corporeal variation. They have demonstrated that disability, far from merely describing marginal conditions, is central to imagining forms of identity. It would be infinitely more accurate, after all, to say that people are born almost equally *immobile*; infancy is a condition of mobility deficiency and social dependency. The importance of this reconceptualization seems to me twofold. It draws attention to the social construction of mobility, and it preserves the category of equality as relevant to the imagining of social progress (Langan 482).

Here, by calling attention to the ways in which we all at one point or another will be unable to easily navigate the various locales which make up our daily lives, (think here about both infancy and old age in addition to various physical and mental disabilities that would make it an arduous task for one to move through modern urban spaces) Langan is deconstructing much of the cultural mythology about the ease (or lack thereof) with which any number of citizens are able to move through their neighborhoods, workplaces, etc. Such a critique not only elucidates the reductive ways in which so many think and speak about bodily motion as a sort of effortless act that needs to be policed in the name

of speed and efficiency (traffic lights, police, sidewalks, stairs, banisters, the list goes on and on) but also helps make the case for Fariq's movements to be imagined as acts of dissent.

Refusing to hide himself away simply because his body functions in a fashion that would not be visually palatable for most passersby, Fariq opts to take his slinky-esque gait to the streets. Re-casting the various cultural signifiers present in his attire, the most important being his fiberglass-reinforced Yankees cap, Fariq's gender performance in this scene is a noteworthy moment of subversion. Eschewing the cyclist helmet that would render him legibly disabled, Fariq instead de-familiarizes the prevailing image of the urban Black male's wardrobe by augmenting the purposes of the fitted cap, transforming it from solely a fashion statement into an instrument of protection. There are a myriad of moments throughout the text where Fariq exhibits this sort of alchemic sensibility, always finding ways to alter the world around him to suit the needs and desires of his particular body.

Though the narrator sometimes implicitly critiques Fariq as a disabled man attempting to pass for a nondisabled one (and in the process highlights the problematic hyper-masculine thug/object of ridicule binary Fariq occasionally capitulates to) he also mentions the "coolness" of the disabled Black and Latino population of East Harlem. Somehow, in the cultural context of this particular urban space, disability does not necessarily preclude one from being perceived as a member of the in-crowd, of attaining cool. Still, far too often in the version of East Harlem described in *Tuff*, the maintenance of coolness necessitates an adherence to a certain set of dangerous social scripts:



On the one hand, cool pose embodies the kaleidoscopic brilliance of the black male self. People are drawn to the power of the cool, black male because he epitomizes control, strength and pride... On the other hand, being cool can become more important than life itself...it can exact a price that seems destructively high (Majors and Billson 4).

Yet, what is perhaps more productive than solely listing the ways in which Fariq re-enforces masculine stereotype (an arguably radical move within itself given the ways in which disabled men of color have historically been barred from such discourses) is analyzing the ways in which he expands upon the reader's perception of what disabled Black men can look, move and sound like. Pertaining specifically to the last of this performative troika, some of Fariq's most interesting moments in the text come when he is given the platform to speak at length about his unique worldview. A devout member of the Five Percent nation<sup>4</sup>, Fariq's plethora of passionate speeches, rife with odd wordplay and associations between a number of seemingly unrelated of topics (perhaps Beatty's way of deploying a not-so-subtle critique of Five Percenter philosophy) nonetheless provide us with fascinating examples of how he transgresses the strictures around disabled identity. An illustrative example of this subversion is on display in Chapter 7, "A Spoonful of Borscht," where Fariq has a run-in with a local rabbi, Spencer

Throckmorton:

"Fariq grew excited, rubbing his ankh with on hand and pointing in Spencer's face with the other. "ADL? Oh, you playing the acronym game? JDL and JDO. We got some initialis too. I-S-L-A-M— I Self Lord And Master. F-O-I—Fruit of Islam, but when the Jihad starts, F-O-I going to stand for Fariq obliterating infidels... Wherever he goes, the Jew be stirring up trouble. I know my lessons, son. 'Mint Julep': Mint equals money. Jew lip. Lip, kiss. Jews kiss money. Kiss, love. Jews love money. 'Ed-jew-cate': Teach the ways of the Jew. "Jewlius Caesar..." (Beatty 94).

What is most fascinating about this anti-Semitic, highly problematic moment from Fariq is where he begins his argument, with the principle of Five Percenter faith which decrees

that the Black man is the “Lord and Master” not only of himself but all that he surveys, a god. For a man with a number of physical disabilities to ascribe to such a philosophy, particularly as one living in a global culture that has for centuries constructed physical impairment as divine punishment for past sins<sup>5</sup>, is a far cry from what one familiar with the beliefs of the Five Percent Nation would expect. Yet, if Fariq truly believes that he is a god, many of the negative cultural meanings attached to his body by the unenlightened masses are robbed of their power.

Inspired by the same prevailing discourses of African American inferiority that fueled the growth of the Five Percent Nation in the 1960’s, Fariq deifies himself as a means of combating a racist, ableist world that is more than willing to remind him of everyday of how divine he is not; of how his status as a lower-class, disabled Black man barely allows him to qualify as human. Yet, rather than settling for a life in which he is limited by the socially imposed boundaries placed on his body, Fariq chooses to perform a rendition of disabled Black male identity that accounts for historical perceptions of disability and maintains strength, control, and cultural pride not in spite of them, but *because* of them. This is the crux of the (crip)walk, the ability of disabled Black men within particular narratives to assert their identity in a fashion that both challenges the limitations of Black masculinity while celebrating the most beautiful aspects of it, that pushes the framework to its limits even as it incorporates its redemptive attributes.

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<sup>5</sup> For a more extensive history of disability in the West, particularly the age-old notion of disability as divine curse, see Lennard J Davis’ article, *Constructing Normalcy*.

Throughout the text, Beatty consistently finds ways to subtly mention Fariq's corporeal difference as a means of constantly reminding the reader that it is there. The name "Fariq" itself seems to be not only the author's way of riffing on the pro-Black, Nation of Islam-influenced nature of his character, but also on his disability status; a barely concealed play on the word "freak." While such an attempt at signifyin(g)<sup>6</sup> on the tradition of reading/labeling the disabled body as inherently freakish could be interpreted as offensive, I believe that Beatty is making a far more complex move than simply branding his most legibly disabled character with a veiled epithet as an attempt at humor. Instead, Fariq's name can be viewed as a literary device that urges the reader to think about the ways in which many of us are marked from birth by some form of difference. In his case, the reality of his corporeal deviance is brought front and center by his name every time it is written in the narrative. It is in this fashion that *Tuff* becomes a text where disability is not an aspect of one's identity to be hidden (though there are times where Fariq certainly tries) but rather an undeniable truth that is ever-present. This move on Beatty's part fundamentally challenges, quite literally, the way folks are able to talk about disability within the scope of the narrative, forcing them to engage with the existence of disabled individuals and communities in an honest manner that is rarely replicated in the real world.

Other characters in the book may recognize Fariq's corporeal difference, but it is certainly no more a point of ridicule or scorn than Winston's obesity or Whitey's ethnicity (Whitey being the sole Caucasian occupant of Winston and Fariq's block in

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<sup>6</sup> See Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*

East Harlem). Now, it is important to clarify here that this is not an attempt to make the reductive argument that in *Tuff*, disability is a form of oppression that is akin to race. What I am positing instead is that Beatty's book, through Fariq's relationship with his loved ones, offers its interlocutors a completely new model for looking at disabled figures in literature; one that allows for intricate, developed relationships between disabled characters and nondisabled ones that complicates the readers' understanding of how certain interactions can and should play out. Rather than simply standing in as a symbol for loss or frailty, Fariq is portrayed as a three-dimensional character with a very real set of insecurities, strengths and passions; a man who is accepted fully by those closest to him, crutches and all.

In the motley crew of dealers and lowlifes Fariq calls friends, the type of posturing normally required by the disabled in order to gain acceptance from what Dr Rosemarie Garland-Thomson calls "normates" is rendered unnecessary:

To be granted fully human status by normates, disabled people must learn to manage relationships from the beginning. In other words, disabled people must use charm, intimidation, ardor, deference, humor, or entertainment to relieve nondisabled people of their discomfort. Those of us with disabilities are supplicants and minstrels, striving to create valued representations of ourselves in our relations with the nondisabled majority (Garland-Thomson 14).

Fariq's relationships throughout the book provide powerful counterpoints to Garland-Thomson's theory. It is clear from the outset that his inclusion in his social circle is not contingent upon his ability to entertain or comfort, but rather the fundamental understanding shared by all his boys that in a world governed by ideals of beauty, intelligence, and worth that none of them quite fit into, Fariq's need for crutches and unusual skull formation don't really matter much at all. Yet, lest one be falsely led into thinking that Beatty has crafted a metropolitan utopia where everyone accepts each other

irrespective of individual difference, Winston later points out (in reference to Fariq) that, “The Muslims don’t [even] want this motherfucker. He too crippled. Neither Muslim headquarters nor Mecca has handicapped parking”(Beatty 96).

Mean-spirited as Winston’s comment may initially seem, there is undoubtedly truth to be found in his statement about Fariq’s tenuous relationship with the Five Percent Nation. More often than not, the hyper-masculine grandiloquence exhibited by the group’s followers is the kind that seeks to expose and alienate individuals like Fariq; Black men whose bodies seem to operate in direct contrast to the brand of ideal Black maleness being championed by various proponents of Five Percenter philosophy. Thus, in an effort to carve out a comfortable ontological space for himself despite his various detractors, Fariq on more than one occasion finds ways to push back<sup>7</sup>. Rather than be an object of pity or ridicule, he chooses instead to be an unkind god, a supreme being who understands all and answers to no one. In the process, Fariq unveils disability as a social construct that is both incredibly fluid and undeniably relative. A character who directly challenges Frantz Fanon’s claim that “there are times when the Black man is locked into his body” (Fanon 225), Fariq throughout the entirety of *Tuff* serves as a powerful example of what can happen when Black men realize that they are more than simple equations of muscle and bone, when the time is taken to find beauty in what the rest of the world deems unclean.

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<sup>7</sup> There are a myriad of moments in the text where Fariq strikes back against the imposed silence so often ascribed to those with mental/physical disabilities; sometimes it as subtle as aiming an insult at another member of the crew, but most times it when he is able to use his rhetorical flair to often interesting, if slightly far-fetched, social criticism through the lenses of Five Percenter philosophy and Black Nationalism.

Yet, as such a figure, Fariq also provides a number of moments in which the perceived-to-be-nondisabled reader can gain insight into the everyday life of one with whom they can both readily relate and not relate at all, a character whose struggles short-circuit traditional representations of male protagonists in the realm of postmodern African American literature. There are points in the text where the presence of Fariq's disability grabs the narrative by the throat, jarring the reader into more fully engaging his experience as one worth particular note in contrast to all of the parallel storyline's taking place in Beatty's fast-paced tale. One such moment is in the beginning of the novel, when Fariq is first introduced to the reader not only by the aforementioned description of his physical makeup and fashion sense, but also by the childhood experience that seems to explain much of the hyper-masculine posturing that Fariq displays over the course of the book:

“Fariq's toes began to tingle. He could feel the vibrations—the vibrations from the scraping of his corrective shoes as he dragged them over the craggy pavement, trying to run. Fariq was it for an entire summer: lumbering after screaming hordes of children on his crutches, feeling like the neighborhood leper, never catching anyone.” (Beatty 11)

Here, Beatty deploys Fariq's physical difference in a manner that renders him both familiar and foreign, using the playground game “tag” as a means of inserting Fariq into a narrative of childhood play and competition that many can recognize, while simultaneously complicating that narrative through the presence of the moving disabled body. Fariq's ascribed role in this situation is one that forces us all to confront the difficulties faced by physically disabled individuals forced to navigate urban spaces not designed for their particular needs. Beatty's invocation of the term “leper” is especially apropos given the medical, social and vernacular history of word that has gone from

being solely the signifier for a specific medical condition to now standing in as a sort of terminological catch-all for those relegated to life on the margins.

In this moment in the text, Fariq's literal *walk* becomes a springboard for Beatty's consistent (though not always readily apparent) critique of both internalized and institutionalized ableism. Fariq's manner of walking ruptures our nostalgic imaginings of the playground as a utopian space of uninhibited joy and freedom, unceremoniously revealing the biases inherent in the very ground we walk upon (filled as it is with divots and potholes that make the very technologies nondisabled society uses to police the movements of the disabled rather perilous devices to actually use). Dis(en)abled by a society that lacks both the architectural means to make crutches less cumbersome and the ethical wherewithal to teach its children not to exploit the vulnerability of others, Fariq's moment of public embarrassment is one that elucidates the peculiar marginalization experience by disabled communities on a daily basis. His (crip)walk becomes a call to arms for the reader, a sad yet illuminating point in the narrative where it is clear that Fariq's physical disability is not some sort of misplaced metaphor for loss or frailty, but a tool through which he can expose the discriminatory nature of the world we live in.

## Section 2: Deconstructing the Black Mask(uline)

"We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries/To thee from tortured souls arise/We sing, but oh the clay is vile/Beneath our feet, and long the mile; /But let the world dream otherwise, We wear the mask!" – Paul Laurence Dunbar

"He wears a mask just to cover the raw flesh/ A rather ugly brother with flows that's gorgeous" – M.F. Doom

From his humble beginnings as a participant in the weekly open mic series at the Nuyorican Poetry Café,<sup>8</sup> to critical acclaim for his 2004 album *Madvillain*, to being booed off stage at the 2008 Rock the Bells concert in Radio City Music Hall, the only thing that seems to be consistent about the artist commonly known as MF Doom (his other personas/monikers include but are not limited to: King Geedorah, Viktor Vaughn and DOOM, a fact that within itself speaks to his liminality) is his mask. Emerging in the late 90's as a fixture on the NYC poetry scene, MF Doom (referred to hereafter by his given name, Daniel Dumile so as to avoid confusion) first hit the stage wearing a stocking cap over his face. To many at the time, this basic form of covering probably appeared to be little more than unnecessary accoutrement deployed for shock value, a harmless gag being used by a novice performer to distract from his lack of skill. What few, if any, seemed to realize was that Dumile's costume held a much higher level of symbolic value for the burgeoning artist. The stocking, which would eventually be replaced by a metal mask, was actually meant to stand in as a covering for the *emotional* scars etched on Dumile by the shooting death of his older brother. In his recent biography, the enigmatic MC claims that he went underground after his brother's death to not only begin "recovering from his wounds" but also to eventually strike back "against the industry that so badly deformed him."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The Nuyorican Poetry Café is, in essence, the mecca of slam poetry. The venue has launched the careers of any number of prominent spoken word artists, poets and writers, including but not limited to the aforementioned Paul Beatty, Kahlil Alumstafa and Saul Williams.

<sup>9</sup> Doom's official bio, which doubles as a remix of the origin story of the comic book character, Dr. Doom, is entitled



It is in these comments regarding the circumstances under which Dumile created the character MF Doom that my interest in not only Dumile's corpus of work, but indeed the ways in which the characters contained therein perform their individual gender and racial identities, lies. Here, Dumile makes it clear that MF Doom is a character created as a means of escape for his real-life trauma; a physically disabled figure whose disfigured body represents not only the pain that Dumile has gone through, but also the potential subversive power to be found within those moments of agony. Dumile's persona is, after all, based off of the Marvel Comics character, Dr. Doom, a heartless villain whose face was disfigured after a science experiment gone horribly wrong. Through this act of signifyin(g) on a disabled figure in another medium, Dumile is able to create MF Doom, a character that is not only radical because of his identity as a corporeally deviant person of color within an industry that revolves around the image of the hyper-violent, able-bodied Black man, but also its presence in a postmodern hip-hop culture all-too-consumed with reductive conceptions of authenticity (an assertion that, at the very least, implies that one be present in their own body when (re)presenting their musical identity).

Yet, rather than ascribe to such limiting theories about Black maleness in hip-hop, Dumile instead finds power in the creation of alternate identity, splitting himself into multiple subjectivities as a means of resisting those who so desperately seek to lock him down. In his article on the prevalence of racial under/overtones in the world of comic book lore, *"Black Skins" and White Masks: Comic books and the secret of race*, Marc Singer writes:

The secret identity, and particularly its public component, the costumed identity, is the most readily apparent trait that unites such disparate characters as the alien Superman, the god Thor, and the strictly human Batman in the category of "superhero." Even characters whose identities are publicly known, like the Hulk...often have a ...visually characterized division between their private selves and their public, costumed identities...Thus, superhero identities need not be secret,

but they should be split...The idea of the split identity, one of the most definitive and distinctive traits of the superhero, is also one of the most powerful...figures used to illustrate the dilemmas and experiences of minority identity. The concept has a long pedigree in theories of race, beginning in 1903 with W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* and his concepts of the veil and double-consciousness (Singer 113).

The bridge Singer draws here between people of color and superheroes is critical not only to a discussion of MF Doom in regard to race, but disability as well. Just like anyone who fits, however uncomfortably or unwillingly, under the umbrella of disability identity, superheroes are individuals marked by corporeal difference, figures who deviate greatly from the ideal, normative body and operate instead as signifiers for hypertrophy, abundance, and excess. The aforementioned superheroes (i.e. The Hulk, Superman, etc.) expose the fallacy of disability as it is traditionally understood, blurring the line between human, superhuman, and not-quite-human-at-all and in the process exposing just how arbitrary the borders are between celebrated and stigmatized subjectivities.

Thus, it is perhaps in the body of MF Doom that we find our ideal example of the (crip)walk outside of the literary world, an individual who is able to utilize disability as a means through which he can actually *increase* his mobility. The mask that stands in as a signifier of his disfigurement is the very same entity that frees MF Doom, giving him “an available resource and structure, solid and stable as armor...the supreme insignia of power: the power to see without being seen”(Derrida 8) and in the process allowing him the sort of creative freedom most hip-hop artists only dream of. Multiple identities (in addition to incredibly complex lyrics and an erratic flow) make MF Doom nearly impossible to pin down both sonically and conceptually. Yet, is not only on-record that Dumile practices this sort of liminality; arguably, the instances where his use of symbolic

disfigurement is most effective as a means of resistance against restrictive paradigms is when he is onstage in the character of MF Doom.

Using the mask as subterfuge, he regularly sends what have come to be known as “Doom imposters” out to do his shows for him. Thus, on any given night, an audience member is not sure whether or not they will be hearing from Daniel Dumile performing the MF Doom persona, or someone else (usually a far less talented individual who can barely lip-sync) entirely. When interviewed recently about his unorthodox approach to live shows, Dumile had this to say:

“I tell you one thing: when you come to a Doom show, come expecting to hear music, don’t come expecting to *see*. You never know who you might see. It has nothing to do with a visual thing. Use your mind and think. I might be there. Next time I do a show, I might tell everybody to close their eyes. Use your own mind’s eye. That’s better than a camera phone, know what I’m sayin’?” (Dumile).

It would appear that Doom is not only interested in the act of splitting his own identity, but in fact rupturing the sensory experience of the hip-hop show itself, transforming it from being an act of (re)presentation (both of the artist’s corporeal body and music,) into what one could almost call an act of performative surrogacy, if you will. Doom believes that it is the music, and not the body, that should, quite literally, be center stage within the context of a live performance. Though his body may be the original source of the sounds that serve as the building blocks of his oeuvre, Doom decides to take it out of the equation completely. In his privileging of the aural over the visual, Doom joins an extensive lineage of African American cultural producers whose work exists in the interstice between literature and music.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See Alex Weheliye’s, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity*.

Doom's performance of disfigurement is inextricably linked to this desire to highlight the slippages between the heard and the seen; his mask is the very object that opens the door for this sort of subversive stage work to take place. It is the very presence, or perhaps lack thereof, of Dumile's disabled character, Doom, that short-circuits not only the traditional workings of the hip-hop stage performance, but the institution of the concert itself. Doom fans never know for sure who they will see when they arrive at a particular venue; they may get Doom himself, a decent imposter, or an awful performer who barely knows any Doom lyrics at all. This constant breaching of the social contract between performer and patron, musician and listener, is just the sort of destabilizing act that keeps Doom's (crip)walk in motion, his rusted, metal mask operating as a consistently effective means of subterfuge. Yet, the mask not only acts a means through which Dumile can shake stricture, but also serves as the primary connection for both himself and his audience to both the aforementioned Dr. Doom as well as the fantasy persona of MF Doom:

As hidden transcript, the fantasy persona constructs a valuable commentary on hip-hop reality. The persona artist is uniquely positioned to subvert the cultural and commercial gaze by which the rap performer is judged...Dumile uses his MF DOOM persona to critique the industry that wronged him in an earlier stage of his career when he performed as a different artist. These personae, as they split the performer's identity, can at the same time work to strengthen and preserve the rap self that is strained by the differing criteria of the music business and a culture that grew out of the streets (Hess 309).

In an industry consumed with the notion of "keeping it real," of consistently (re)presenting similar modes of cultural authenticity, Doom's performance of disability is a means through which he is able to strike back at an entire market which hinges upon the presence of recognizable Black male bodies than can be readily identified and thus expediently exploited. Doom's mask, like Fariq's crutches, fiberglass cap, and deviant

gait, are blotches of paint that smear any sort of legible Black masculine performance beyond recognition, in its stead leaving a space in which different versions of Black manhood can exist, perhaps even thrive. Yet, in Doom's case, there still remains an undeniable tension between his lived and performed experience. As a nondisabled man, Daniel Dumile's frequent performance of disfigured identity may call up certain questions about what Tobin Siebers terms "disability drag," those moments throughout cultural production where nondisabled artists embody disability through performance:

"A final variety of the masquerade...I call "disability drag." It, too, represses disability...Its disadvantage is that disability appears as a façade overlaying able-bodiedness. The use of able-bodied actors, whose bombastic performances represent their able-bodiedness as much as their pretence of disability, not only keeps disability out of public view but transforms its reality and its fundamental characteristics. It renders disability invisible because able-bodied people substitute for people with disabilities..."(Siebers 18).

Now, while Siebers here is referring specifically to instances in popular cinema such as Tom Hanks' starring role in *Forrest Gump* or Sean Penn's Oscar-nominated performance in the film *I Am Sam*, I am curious about the extent to which Doom's performances also serve as a sort of disability drag. His constant signifyin(g) on Dr. Doom, a character who is "actually" disfigured, allows him an entry point into perceived corporeal difference that he can all too easily put on and take off, quite literally. This is an aspect of his performed identity that is potentially problematic when one considers the daily struggles of those who have lived through acts that have left them physically scarred in ways that don't go away when the show is over. Even as I celebrate the power of Doom's mask as a tool for increased agency, I am also cognizant of the various issues that may arise when one takes up the identity of a marginalized group with whom they have no affiliation in the material world. Though he is merely *re-presenting* the fictional Dr. Doom in the eyes of some, for others he may be seen as *representing* the disfigured Black body, this is

where the danger lies. Still, even when taking into account the potential failings of Doom's utilization of the mask to shake up the world, the presence of his metal face wear does undeniably bring to the forefront of underground hip-hop culture a discussion about freakishness, scarring, and the carnivalesque that otherwise might not be had at all:

The masquerade counteracts passing, claiming disability rather than concealing it. Exaggerating or performing difference, when that difference is a stigma, marks one as a target, but it also exposes and resists the prejudices of society. The masquerade fulfills a desire to tell a story about disability, often the very story that society does not want to hear because it refuses to obey the ideology of able-bodiedness (Siebers 19).

Though the sort of masquerading being described by Siebers is meant to reference disabled individuals who exaggerate the nature of their particular disability as a means of subterfuge, I wonder whether or not we can think of Doom's masking as a similar sort of masquerade, a set of moments in which he "performs difference" as a way of creating a musical and stage experience that defies convention and puts the corporeally deviant body on display on its own terms. Doom's "masquerading" is in this way not so different from Fariq's, as both figures play with their perceived oddness at various moments as a way of getting what they want: in Doom's case, freedom from obligation and in Fariq's case, sometimes as a route to victory in an argument.<sup>11</sup> Each of these figures expose the fluid nature of disability as an identity category, displaying for all to see the various holes that exist in any sort of argument for disability as solely a marker of impairment, debility, or lack. For Doom, the haunting specter of disfigurement becomes a superpower rather than a weakness, a key to a realm of performance possibility locked

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<sup>11</sup> Here, I am referencing a point in the narrative on page 95 where Fariq accuses Rabbi Throckmorton of ableism as a way of discrediting him. He essentially exaggerates his pride in his disability identity to gain the support of those around him. Though he fails in this endeavor, it is nonetheless a valuable moment to reflect upon when thinking about how he negotiates being both Black and disabled in public spaces, how he plays with disability and popular perception of it to subvert.

off to all those unwilling or unable to find themselves through the mask, to see without being seen.

### Conclusion: On Gangsters and Goffman

“While the stranger is present before us, evidence can arise of his possessing an attribute that makes him different from others in the category of persons available for him to be, and of a less desirable kind...a person who is quite thoroughly bad, dangerous, or weak. He is thus reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one.” -Erving Goffman, *Stigma*

Gang counterliteracy places writing directly into the hands of those popularly depicted as modern-day savages, animals, or defiled subhumans...what does it mean to bring “ letters” into worlds considered to be primitive, uncivilized, and undereducated world? In gang dancing among Bloods and Crips, the answer lies in connections between black bodies in motion, social and structural violence, African American expressive culture and the position of writing.” – Susan A. Philips, *Crip Walk, Villain Dance, Pueblo Stroll: The Embodiment of Writing in African American Gang Dance*

(Crip)walking On Water is a project born from late night conversations and music videos. Fascinated as I have been for quite some time by the link between terminology used to describe both the storied U.S. street gang (The Crips) and the disability community at-large (crips), the title for this paper emerged at first as little more than a (not so) clever play on words I shared one night with my best friend, Jonathan. Much to my surprise, he was taken aback by the Russian doll nature of the phrase “(crip)walking on water,” entranced by the number of the layers to be found lying latent within its murky, uncharted depths. We talked about how the Crip Walk itself (a dance that has existed for quite some time but was made popular in mainstream musical circles by Crip-affiliated artists such as Snoop Doggy Dogg in the late 20th and early 21<sup>st</sup> century), appeared to be a performance of physical disability; how the various dips, leans, and unpredictable leg movements made the dancer’s limbs appear unruly, unstable, almost as if they had little to no control over what their lower body would do next. The dance, in our minds, was a beautiful paradox, a readily recognizable signifier of a cultural group

obsessed with (arguably) static notions of violence and masculinity even as they regularly

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performed a set of movements that displayed the undeniably fluid nature of the Black body.

Taking the analysis a step further, I began to think about the more literal connections between Crips and crips. My mind meandered to Laurence Ralph's dissertation, "*You Never Hear About the Wheelchair*": *Violence and Mobility in a Westside Chicago Gang*," and the argument Ralph makes therein about not only the connections between gang violence and the rapidly rising number of physically disabled Black men in the Chicago area, but also how said spike is affecting the conversations now being had in spaces across the city regarding the everyday experience of living as a Black male wheelchair-user in a local and national culture that privileges, and in some ways almost requires, a very different sort of masculine subjectivity for African Americans. In any number of Black communities, the disabled are becoming a much more readily visible, outspoken contingent, one that needs to be accounted for and reckoned with as a force for social change. I wondered if these Black, disabled men had found their home within the literary realm, and if so, where? What texts were out there that shed light on what that experience was like? Who was taking the time to acknowledge that this experience existed at all?

The final step in the peculiar journey which eventually brought me here, before you, was one rooted in childhood memory. Training my mind on the oft-cited Biblical parable of Peter's walk on water to meet Jesus, the various threads of my argument finally began to come together, interweaving themselves into the distinct narrative that I wanted to put forward. It dawned upon me that the research I have been conducting over the past two years within the interstices between African American Studies, Performance



Studies, literary theory, and disability studies, is work firmly invested in the existence, and persistence, of miracles. Armed with a faith not so different from the kind it took for Paul to step out onto an ever-shifting expanse of ocean, the disabled African American figures that I am committed to studying are people who walk through every day unsure if the world they are walking in, the very communities they call home, will hold them up. Slippery as race, gender and ability constructs may already be, the disabled Black male is particularly vulnerable to the nefarious attacks of a White supremacist society, with its constant policing of aberrant bodies and outright refusal to recognize as human those who deviate from the imagined corporeal “norm.”

*(Crip)walking On Water* emerged as the amalgamation of these three disparate ideas, the brainchild of a young author centrally concerned with highlighting the voices, bodies, and stories of a marginalized community that never quite seems to get its due within the realm of literary analysis. It would be fitting here to say that both Fariq and Doom came to me as potential objects of analysis in a vision of some sort; that their narratives were the ideal ones for the sort of critique I was interested in furthering via this essay as discursive vehicle. Truth be told, I am bound to the authors of the texts interrogated within *(Crip)walking On Water* not by reverie, but by space. As a regular participant in the poetry slam scene at the Nuyorican Poetry Café in New York City, I have for some time now been interested in what happens to those Nuyo regulars who continue their careers as authors, but go on to create texts outside the realm of spoke word poetry.

In my search for such individuals, those who had dared over the years to deviate from the beaten path and dance with a new partner, Beatty and Dumile were not the first,

but were certainly the most interesting, figures I stumbled upon. That they both deal quite often in their work with issues of disability, masculinity, and the Black male body is no coincidence I'm sure, but I cannot help but feel that my interest in these two authors stems also from the ways in which they play with boundaries in their stage performance and approach to writing. They both have a firm understanding of what the presence of physical disability *does* to the way we think about language and narrative; how it warps both the stage and the page in a manner that simply cannot be ignored. Much like the Crips in the above epigraph from Susan A. Phillips, Beatty and Dumile re-write the disabled Black male experience through their character's movements, firmly placing narrative control into hands rarely trusted with such power. In the process of this exchange, a new realm of possibilities comes into being, and a fresh approach to literature is found in the crooked footsteps of unlikely heroes.

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