

The Aesthetics of Disability, Abortion, and Adoption in Kia Corthron's *Cage Rhythm* and *Come Down Burning*

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□ ABSTRACT □

This article investigates how the culturally constrictive notions of disability produce a discourse that is particularly pervasive in the interpretation of abortion and adoption practices. In particular, this article addresses the African American response to the socially- maintained clinical construction of blackness as a unifying genealogical, genetic, and psychological impairment in the American culture. In this concern, the theatre of Kia Corthron, an African American playwright, investigates the physical and psychopathological implication of racial disability for black women. The identified research gaps are related to how Corthron expands African American playwrights' critique of the alignment of blackness with disability to investigate other symptoms of racial disability. In particular, Corthron's *Cage Rhythm* and *Come Down Burning* contest the presentation of abortion and adoption as consistent definers of the socially- constructed racial disability of female blackness that entails deprivation of viable options for Black motherhood. In this regard, Corthron's plays envision how disabled black women could mobilize their own terms of abortion or child relinquishment and adoption to invert the racially-motivated gynecological grounds that predispose the oppressive correlation of disability, abortion, and adoption.

Keywords: African American, disability, abortion, adoption, unmothering, other mother

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جماليات الإعاقة ، الإجهاض ، والتبني في مسرحيات " إيقاع قفص " و " هبوط الروح و توقد الجسد " للكاتبة كورثرون

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□ ملخص □

يستقصي هذه البحث كيف تنتج المفاهيم الثقافية المقيدة والتي تعتمد بشكل ممنهج التشخيص السريري للإعاقة خطاباً مؤثراً في تفسير الإجهاض و التبني في الثقافة الأمريكية . على وجه الخصوص، يركّز هذا البحث على الرد الأمريكي الإفريقي فيما يخص التوصيف السريري للعرق الأسود كنوع من الإعاقات المفترضة اجتماعياً و خاصة الجينية و الجسدية و النفسية . في هذا المجال ، يبحث مسرح كورثرون ، الكاتبة الأمريكية من أصول إفريقية، الأعراض النفسية و الجسدية للإعاقة العرقية كما ظهرت عند النساء السود . وعليه يعالج هذا البحث الثغرات الموجودة في الدراسات المتعلقة بمسرح كورثرون و خاصة تطويرها للنقد المسرحي الإفريقي الأمريكي فيما يخص اعتماد العرق الأسود كإعاقة حيث تتطرق لأعراض أخرى غير متداولة مسبقاً لهذه الإعاقة العرقية. و بشكل خاص ، تستهجن كورثرون في مسرحيتها "إيقاع قفص" و "هبوط الروح و توقد الجسد" تقديم التبني و الإجهاض كموصفات دائمة للإعاقة المكرسة اجتماعياً والتي تحرم النساء السود من الخيارات المهمة للأومومة الكاملة. في هذا السياق، تستعرض كورثرون كيف يمكن للنساء السود تقديم مصطلحاتهن الخاصة بالإجهاض و التبني لقلب الموازين العلمية الجينية و العرقية و التي تقترض مسبقاً الارتباط بين الإعاقة، والإجهاض، و التبني بشكل مجحف يؤدي الى اضطهاد و تهميش النساء السود.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الإفريقي الأمريكي، الإعاقة، الإجهاض، التبني، انتزاع الأومومة، الأم المكتملة

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Introduction:

This article addresses how cultural ideologies systematically limit the opportunities for individuals who experience a wide range of inscribed genetic, physical and psychopathological disability. In particular, this article investigates how cultural designations of disability produce a discourse that is particularly pervasive in the interpretation of abortion and adoption practices. The clinical implication of disability is a central theme that has been addressed in the African American theatre. In this concern, Kia Corthron, an African American playwright, investigates physical and psychopathological symptoms of disability coupled with blackness that is constructed as a unifying genealogical and genetic impairment. In her two plays *Cage Rhythm* and *Come Down Burning*, Corthron interrogates how cultural, social, and racial perceptions of disability inflect the clinical meanings and functions of abortion and adoption. In this context, Corthron integrates thematic and theatrical strategies to invert the scientific and cultural “truths” about disability in order to displace their incorporation in the oppression and marginalization of Black women who are racially handicapped and incarcerated. Using the Black context, we argue that Corthron coins innovative thematic and theatrical techniques to invert the predisposed correlation of disability, abortion, and adoption.

Research Objectives:

Abortion and Adoption in the American Context:

In the American context, abortion has always been a fervently contested issue and a malleable topos that has projected varied references. The history of American culture reveals how abortion has been mainly assessed in light of male professions that are medicine, law, philosophy, and theology. Abortion referred to the freedom of maternal choice that religion forbids. Then it has become transformed into a “conflict-ridden human choice” that instigated an abortion debate given the hyperconscious discourse of medicine that structures choice and presents barriers to abortion access (Witt, 1990: 3). So, medicine has for long contained an explicit injunction against abortion. However, such stand has changed with the many gains that have been made in women’s rights since the mid-twentieth century given the rationale that abortion bans could lead to disability and death. So, the new legal ground presented for abortion is not to endanger the mother’s life. Thus, professional or technical decisions need to be given. However, twentieth century abortion has projected a process of individualism and autonomy. So, extraprofessional constituencies such as reproductive autonomy, economic necessity, family planning, personhood, and bodily rights of women have contributed to the ongoing debate on abortion (Taumann, 1999: 156).

On the other hand, infantile abandonment that entails adoption has also been a recurring aspect of notable controversy in the history of American culture. Beginning in the 19th century US, legislative laws gradually formalized adoption as a legal procedure (Singley, 2011:29). Relinquishment and adoption were considered harmonious with the Puritan settlement in the New World, Calvinist traditions of salvation, migration, changing attitudes toward genealogy and identity, and the arising issues of new beginnings and nation building. Early American settlers recognized themselves both as abandoned children and God’s chosen adoptees, and relied heavily on the practice of “placing out”—moving children from one household to another to fulfill educational obligations or because a parent died (Singley, 2011: 30). Yet, these early ideas of adoption, or placing out, still conflicted with the Puritan’s cultural xenophobia. As Singley suggests, tensions arise from the Puritans’ emphasis on adoption as a form of salvation and their prioritization of genealogical kinship. However, the turn of the twentieth century marked a shift from

themes of nation building to those of science and psychology, prioritizing the mental and physical well-being of the children within adoptive families. Moreover, infanticide relinquishment has become heavily inflicted by social and economic factors that have raised various debates. Some conservative voices have posited relinquishment toward possible adoption as the acceptable alternative to abortion (Jarrett, 2006: 215). These voices established organizations toward that goal and proposed that children of poor mothers be sent to orphanages in order to neatly solve “the problems of legitimacy and welfare” (215). Opposing voices, especially the ones that advocate women’s empowerment, highlight the negative ramifications of infantile abandonment and adoption and insist that “as long as there is so little economic and social support for single mothers, many women will feel presumed to give up their babies for adoption” (Solinger, 2001: 67). Such presumption emphasizes what feminist thinker Rickie Solinger identifies as “object choicelessness of some resourceless women” (2001: 67).

However, issues of race and color caste have undeniably modulated the reception of abortion, infantile abandonment, and adoption in the American context. The influence of racism and ensuing slavery has stipulated different terms of abortion and child abandonment for black people. This stipulation is related to the problematic conflation of race and disability (Kriegel, 1969: 413). In this regard, critics have investigated how the co-construction of disability and slavery offers a history of how “able” and “disabled” bodies influenced the institution of slavery and uncovers a history of how concepts of race, disability, and power converged in the United States in the first half of the nineteenth century and afterwards. Consequently, the historical examination of the toll of racism reveals that abortion, infantile abandonment, and adoption have never been viable options that would reflect the importance and pride of the Black identity. Rather, repressive notions of abortion and abandonment as symptomatic of Black disability have been historically consistent definers of the Black American experience. In this regard, we will argue that such oppressive discourse of abortion and adoption presents a master narrative that Corthron’s plays interrogate and redefine.

Abortion, Child Abandonment, and Adoption in the African American Context:

Reading abortion as a malleable symptom of maternal infanticide is quite an intrinsic presence in the history of African American culture. In this context, the designation of abortion as a form of infanticide is traced back to 19th century slavery, brutality, and harsh economic factors that led to a sorrowful phase in the Black community and generated escape through the psychic trauma of abortion, infantile abandonment, or maternal infanticide. In this concern, various 19th century historical records and slave narratives by female black writers reveal how slavery causes denial of parental presence. For instance, slave women were robbed of every possession in general and their mothering and motherhood in particular. They were never identified as mothers; instead, they were considered breeders: “Their infant children could be sold away from them like calves from cows” (Davis, 2002: 7). So, since the rights offered to black women were negligible, they ultimately did not stand at the position of decision makers. In this regard, we argue that abortion as a practice in the context of racial discrimination has indirectly presumed black women’s non-humanity and ensuing maternal disability that necessitated relinquishment of their babies.

Racism has also generated a repressive discourse of adoption as related to African American people. As indicated before, child relinquishment has been read as an ultimate consequence of blackness that cannot be equated with human and parental

capacity. So, the Black experience of adoption has been inflicted with racial inequalities and marked with racial stigma. The structure of racial discrimination that defines blackness as disability also sustains its invisibility through the other step of adoption that could follow child abandonment. The discourse of adoption projects policies that sanction the denial of blackness as a valid identity. This is evident in the essentialist scripts of privileged white identity that denied adoption of black children. Ultimately, strict race-matching policies that support biological and genealogical criteria of racial stratification have adhered to the rejection of transracial placements of children (Macaulay, 1978: 267). Given the early implications of adoption as emulation of America's new beginning, denying Black children the opportunity of adoption implied their deprivation of prospects of "fresh starts" that enable the struggling child to realize his or her potential. Again, blackness has been endorsed as human disability that does not entail redemption.

Abortion, Child Abandonment, and Adoption in African American Literature:

Disturbing portrayals of disabled black maternity that entails abortion, child abandonment, and even infanticide are addressed in African American women's slave narratives and writings. One extreme example is Toni Morrison's *Beloved* that presents the heart-wrenching story of a black female slave, Sethe, who kills her own daughter in order to protect her from the horror of slavery. Sethe decides to free her baby from the impious birth of being black: "I took and put my babies where they'd be safe" (1978: 201). In her eyes, infanticide does buy her and the children a form of "freedom." So, she claims her children only through acts of violence. Critical readings of abortion and infanticide in these narratives suggest their limited agency. Some critics have read Sethe's act of saving her child from a "world of cruelty and sin" as a marker of the tragic boundaries of the maternal power, a power limited to the mother's physical authority over the helpless offspring. So, it becomes a trope for her mangled maternity, or "unmothering" by a destructive society. Other critical readings of abortion and infanticide highlight how such enforced relinquishment of babies has projected rebellious claims. However, infanticide becomes an attempt of reconstructing her own past. *Beloved* and other infanticide narratives defy Christian mythology that valorizes submission and renunciation, and conspire with an oppressive social order to defend maternal power. So, such infanticide narratives foreground mothers who reject religions and cultural codes that demand the deliverance of their children into a brutal society. According to Furman, "[T]his concept of love and safety as motivation for infanticide is a familiar inversion of conventional thinking in Morrison's work" (1997: 69). Also, critics have highlighted how these women, realize painful and violent maternal strategies of resistance.

Overall, the scholarship on abortion and child relinquishment in African American women's writing suggests that racism and the institution of slavery are major social factors that impose black women's actual acts of abortion and child abandonment that could entail adoption. What can be inferred that despite their rebellious impulse, black women project not quite liberatory decisions of abortion or child desertion. Such decisions are shaped by limited agency, being enforced reactions that either jeopardize or terminate black women's whole motherhood. In other words, black women arguably reenact their racially designated disability. We contend that such conceptualization of abortion and child rejection as symptoms of disability is a considerable problematic that Corthron critiques. In other words, Corthron presents a revolutionary perspective that inverts the established connections between Black women's presumed disability and abortion and/or adoption.

Research Methodology:

Review of Literature on Disability in the Black Theatre

Black theatre has centralized race in its interrogation of the racial stratification of blackness as genetic disability. The historical toll of racism has influenced clinical perceptions that propose the problematic etiology of blackness as mental or physical disability in the African American community. Several social studies reveal that “mental health profession has attempted to prove that African Americans are more generally inclined to severe mental illness and inferior intelligence” (Leigh, 1999: 156). Such clinically-supported but biased observations promote the genetic deficiency of black people who are consequently labeled as mentally retarded, dysfunctional, or disordered. In this context, many African American playwrights have contested the genopolitical alignment of blackness with disability. For instance, Adrienne Kennedy critiques the stereotypes that render the Black woman or the mulatto into a colonial icon of the color-crippled. Kennedy’s standpoint is demonstrated in her play *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, where the blackness of Sarah, the protagonist, is presented as the source of her depression and psychic fragmentation. Kennedy contests the cultural and scientific remedies that propose isolation, concealment, segregation, exile, and quarantine of the disabled Black. To do so, Kennedy adopts what Lennard Davis calls the “dismodern ethic” that “signals a new kind of universalism and cosmopolitanism that is reacting to the localization of identity” (2002: 27), and suggests a “commonality of bodies within the notion of difference” (32). Thus, Kennedy presents historical figures who become thematic and theatrical manifestations of Sarah’s enforced disability for various reasons, such as punishment for rape or failure of the theology of colonization. By so doing, Kennedy transforms alleged Black disability into shared or contracted identity that displaces otherness as everyone is likely to experience impairment at some point in time.

However, Corthron’s theatre dramatizes other presumed manifestations of the socially-inscribed disability of blackness. Corthron suggests in her drama that the disability of blackness is projected in its invisibility. So, in her interview with Bruce Weber, Corthron particularly observes that the themes of genetics and cloning in her play *Slide Glide the Slippery Slope* entail that “to be black is both theatrically unusual and largely irrelevant.” Corthron addresses other symptoms of Black disability. For instance, Corthron’s *Cage Rhythm* presents cases of racially stigmatized Black women whose demonization could develop their blackness into a form of human disability that terminates life. Corthron’s investigation of such racial stand on blackness expands our understanding of disability and its parallel institutions such as remote and isolated rehabs or clinical institutions. In this context, Corthron’s play proposes that color disability determines and inflects new social institutions such as the prison that transforms marginalized and disabled black women into potential convicts who have to be excluded and space-crippled (1994: 50). On the other hand, Corthron transcends race to examine other factors that construct the stereotype of disability. For instance, in *Come Down Burning*, a companion piece to *Cage Rhythm*, disability is not necessarily an outcome of racial essentialism. It may involve physical impairment that is not essentially color-related. Corthron presents the character of Skoolie who is already a cripple. Yet, racism again constructs Skoolie’s blackness as genetic disability and a marker of stigmatization. Though Corthron sustains Black writers’ critique of the alignment of blackness with disability, she expands their notions to investigate other symptoms of racial disability. In particular, Corthron presents abortion and adoption as symptomatic of the socially-constructed racial disability of blackness to function as remedy strategies.

Discussion:

Abortion and adoption in the black context have been shaped by oppression that entails deprivation of viable options. Corthron's *Cage Rhythm* and *Come Down Burning* particularly address the dilemma of single mothers whose black maternity becomes a socially-constructed pathology that should submit for involuntary abortion or relinquishment of their babies. So, both plays contest how black women are forced to accept scientific policies that recommend imposed euthanasia of presumably future disabled offspring. Such euthanasia is presented as either physical abortion that entails literal death or metaphorical abortion presented as submission to adoption that involves child relinquishment and termination of mother-child relations. However, Corthron's plays envision how these disabled black women could mobilize their own terms of abortion or child relinquishment to invert the racially motivated gynecological grounds in the medical practice.

Corthron's *Cage Rhythm* addresses how black maternity is transformed into financial and moral incapacity that ultimately destabilizes maternal presence. In general, *Cage Rhythm* highlights the social construction of single motherhood as pathology in the middle of the twentieth century in the U.S.—an ideology that intensified social pressure on single mothers to relinquish their children for adoption. However, Corthron's play highlights how blackness is already constructed as genetic impairment that further disables single black women and presents a validated excuse for suggesting adoption as a remedy. For instance, the race-disabled community of black women in *Cage Rhythm* is socially and financially rendered into drug-handicapped prisoners and crippled mothers. The play acknowledges and recognizes the dilemma of being a disabled black mother and provides gritty descriptions of the dissolution of the family unit. Avery is a drug addict who struggles with enforced social limitations on her black maternity. In reality, her two daughters, Leesy and Bina, have been adopted by foster parents. She has been away from her daughters for seven years (1994: 57).

In this regard, Corthron interrogates the scientific and objectifying taxonomy of deviance that particularly creates an indeterminate Black motherhood through incarceration. The prison's racist social psychology creates a pathological reality that makes Avery question her parental abilities throughout the play. Avery's uncertainty is precipitated by the scientific and social norms that configure a distorted self-image of Avery as a black mother. Avery makes several references to her being a good mother despite her drug use and incarceration. She performs imagined motherhood by joining her children through astral visits on idyllic jaunts in the park. She keeps pictures of the two daughters to connect her with the outside world. She also spends her time preparing Leesy's Christmas gift, a "crayon-colored Santa Claus which is taped to a home-made 'sleigh'-a disposable Scotch-tape dispenser" (1994: 47). Such practices reflect Avery's performance, though restricted, of mothering in the jail cell. Yet, Avery's prison experience makes her doubt the properness of her motherly conduct even before her incarceration. She expresses her doubts to T. J., her prison inmate, on several occasions. When T.J. comments on her bruises and clumsiness, Avery immediately jumps to the defensive: "I was a good mother! You sayin' I wa'n't?" (1994: 47). She later questions her abusive behavior that was already intended as a protective measure: "One time my oldest Leesy pick up that needle, put it on her arm like Mommy [...] I slap her a lot, she only two. I'm a bad mother. I'm a bad mother?" (1994: 55). So, Avery succumbs to social norms that invalidate her own notion of good motherhood. Thus, Avery's incarceration postulates a

repressive notion of adoption that entails indeterminate motherhood and validates her maternal disability.

Corthron's play exposes how the white prisons' racially driven practices of bodily abuse entail repressive abortion and disabled motherhood. As the play suggests, the imprisoned Black women suffer from enforced violence on their bodies. The violence of incarceration involves intrusion on the women's bodies and violation of their privacy. They have to undergo "post-visit search" (1994: 53) where they get undressed and the C.O. is entitled to feel "in their mouths, behind their ears, through their hair, under their breasts, in their buttocks" (53). The incarcerated women also suffer from bodily abuse in the form of rape by male guards. Montana relates to T. J. her excruciating story: "Whatta you know? Male guards? Well ain't you got the inside scoop 'cept it ain't no secret. They jumped me. Got the best a me and everyone knew, my screams echoin' through the halls through the cells" (65). The trauma of rape has enforced Montana's involuntary abortion of her baby: "First I hoped I have a baby, little ripple, scandal. Then afraid they see my belly swell beat it outa me, so I wanted my period instead. It came. Teased me, hid three months. And came" (65). So, rape has entailed their "unmothering" through involuntary abortion. Incarceration also causes the women's mangled womanhood and motherhood. For instance, Avery undergoes irregular menstruation that medically implies hormonal imbalance and troubled female body: "Hey. Hey. I got my period. I got my period. I ain't had one in seven months. Hey! I got my period I ain't got nothin'" (61). So, the violence and pain of prison cripple these women's bodies.

In *Cage Rhythm*, disabled Black womanhood in prison becomes a trope of self-disintegration and communal dissolution. The incarcerated Black female body that experiences enforced abortion and adoption endures dissolution of body and spirit. In this regard, Montana presents her own conceptualization of such dissolution: "what spirit's gonna wanna set up permanent residence in a body in jail?" (1994: 64). On the other hand, isolation becomes a manifestation of disabled Black womanhood. Each of the imprisoned women prefers to be isolated from any other inmate. Avery first does not want T.J. to intrude on her imagined family: "One rule: Don't touch the pictures" (41). Rift defines their relations. They are always engaged in clumsy fights that end in bruises and scratches on their bodies (50). Again, these bruises contribute to the solidification of their alleged maternal disability. They reflect violent identities that directly presume child-abusive and ultimately unfit motherhood. Such presumption is suggested by T.J. when she first meets Avery and misconstrues her bruises: "I guessed drugs put you in, that's the standard. But you get the clumsiness too often, a scratch here, bruise there, you ain't too popular, that usually means kids" (47).

However, Corthron destabilizes the fixity and categorization with which science cripples black mothers through the alternative concept of "othermothering" that involves biological elasticity. Corthron evokes what Montaigne identifies as the disabled's "emblematic of creation's 'infinity of forms,'" that God, "in his wisdom, supplies as evidence of his inexhaustible bounty" (1971: 539). Corthron integrates this liberatory notion of disability to counteract what Foucault best diagnoses as the constricted "elasticity of organisms" within the domain of science that defines disability (1975: 97). Corthron reveals how the Black community realizes its culturally-specific translation of such elastic disability in the notion of African American experience of othermothering. In this context, critic Patricia Hill-Collins suggests the term "othermothers" to refer to women in the African American community whose "feelings of responsibility for nurturing the children in their own extended family networks have stimulated a more generalized ethic of care

where Black women feel accountable to all the Black community's children" (1990: 331). She goes on to contend that "[t]he notion of Black women as community othermothers for all Black children traditionally allowed Black women to treat biologically unrelated children as if they were members of their own families" (331). In *Cage Rhythm*, Corthron presents a viable case of practicing black othermothering. T.J., Avery's prison inmate, contributes her agency that mobilizes Avery's limited motherhood. T. J. boosts Avery that she is a good mother despite all frustrating accusations (1994: 68). T.J. suggests replacing the damaged sleigh and gives Avery a pen to help reestablish the motherly connection between Avery and Leesy:

T.J. You can make another before tomorrow. Here.

From under her bed, T.J. pulls stationary and a ballpoint pen that clicks four colors. Offers items to Avery, but Avery stares at pen.

Think Leesy like this pen?

Avery nods. Now she takes the pad and begins doodling.

Better save the ink. (69)

So, T.J.'s pen-offer symbolically enunciates Avery's redefinition of motherly care, perseverance, and defiance to disability. In such way, Avery destabilizes biologically constrictive notions of black motherhood by presenting an infinite and elastic form of black mothering that integrates the othermother who helps hold Avery's family structure together by her own ethics of caring.

However, T.J.'s othermotherly presence also helps initiate Avery's own terms of abortion and adoption that are not arbitrated through socially and genetically inscribed disability. T.J.'s colored pen also symbolically helps Avery rewrite her own relation with Leesy. Avery no longer succumbs to social norms that construct her indeterminate black motherhood. Instead, Avery needs to assert her self-independence and wholeness and reconstruct her identity as a mother who is not overwhelmed by pain and humiliation in prison. So, she asserts to Leesy her newly defined identity as a mother who has authority and responsibility: "4:22. When you got here-4:15? 4:15, you said you was gonna be here four. (Pause). You said you gonna be here four, late now. I gotta go to work now, I got stuff to do. Sorry" (1994: 71). By so doing, Avery surpasses her self-disintegration that ultimately instigates involuntary relinquishment of babies and so validates social denigration of black motherhood. In this regard, Avery learns to exercise having a "free body" as recommended by T.J. (69). Such freedom is projected in Avery's metaphorical construction of liberatory abortion that does not reflect disability or terminate her motherhood. Rather, it advocates the presence of the other mother that extends Avery's presence. So, Avery's agency is present to discipline Leesy about respecting time and place protocols. And the foster mother is no longer going to be the alternative mother who could jeopardize Avery's family structure. The other mother is going to provide financial care for Leesy:

LEESY. Can I have a soda? Out the machine?

EVERY. No. No money.

LEESY: Please? Root beer?

EVERY. No money, I got no money. Ask your mother. (1994: 71)

Avery's conduct seems to generate harmony with Leesy who gives Avery paperweight as a keepsake. Leesy even confides that she likes Avery's ink pen offered by T.J. (71). Thus, Leesy's paperweight could be read as a mark of Leesy's approval of Avery's rewriting of motherhood. So, Avery's terms of abortion and choices of adoption are presented as liberatory strategies to reclaim her daughter and challenge the racially-

imposed symptoms of black mothers' disability. Ultimately, the presence of T.J. as an othermother makes a dramatic contribution by mobilizing Avery's new type of community in a holistic system whose ethics of elasticity moves the whole black community forward. By reclaiming Leesy through othermothering, Avery contributes her own terms to the collective initiative of child reclamation in the African American community that has always been deeply concerned about the loss of black children from their communities and has mobilized to claim them (Townsend, 1995:121).

Corthron's other focal play *Come Down Burning* presents the development of blackness into physical and psychological disability that, as clinically claimed, implies parental failure and deficiency and ultimately induces abortion, death, or relinquishment of children. In the case of black women, racially-enforced disability portrays their experience of abortion as a stigma of disability. In Corthron's play, abortion is stripped of its varied implications as a right or a choice to be presented as an exclusively pathological symptom of disabling blackness. Such correlation is presented in the way black babies in general die because of hunger, malnutrition, and back-alley abortions (2005:145). The play particularly presents Tee, a black woman who is pregnant and already a mother to three small children. Tee is always in escape from the harshness of her reality of racism through stubborn innocence and dreaming. She passively internalizes socially constrictive perspectives of her blackness by replicating their concepts of black women's abortion as a marker of their failure and precipitator of death. So, Tee does not stop having children who are symbolically aborted through malnutrition: "Evie then Will-Joe then Markie-Ann then little baby J.B. Then them youngests died, three years later come Jazzman" (2005:142). Thus, socially-inscribed abortion functions as a trope for Tee's mangled maternity or "unmothering" by a destructive society.

In *Come Down Burning*, socially-inscribed black disability also precipitates dissolution in the Black family unit. Tee and her children live on the scant income of Skoolie, Tee's sister, from plaiting Black women's hair. On the other hand, Skoolie suffers from both racial and physical disability. Skoolie's genetic blackness generates her economic incapacity. However, Skoolie's case of disability is doubled as she also suffers from physical impairment. Skoolie "has legs that don't work. She gets around very ably on her art, a flat wooden steerable board with wheels" (2005: 138). In general, both Tee and Skoolie present occasions of submission to their disabilities that generate their rift. The sisters' hardship provokes tension and rivalry as projected in Tee's constant complaints: "I can take care amyself, Skoolie, don't need you, I take care a my own kids, take care a myself! Myself!" (148). So, Tee relentlessly insists on declaring self-independence and freedom from her sister by limiting the need for Skoolie's money. In retaliation, Skoolie challenges her physical disability by adopting the alternative mother role that almost jeopardizes Tee's family structure and creates more tension between the two sisters. For instance, Skoolie insists on demonstrating her superior motherly care through excellence in plaiting hair to Evie, Tee's daughter:

Skoolie: Skoolie take care a ya

Evie: My mama take care a me

Skoolie: And your mama. (pause). Who done your hair for ya, huh? Pretty plaits, thick, pretty, who done that, run the comb make it pretty make it don't hurt? No tears I see. Today.

Evie: You make it pretty and don't even hurt. Not even the comb. (2005: 138-39).

So, the sisters' genetically and socially inscribed disabilities validate Tee's maternal failure, and arbitrate Skoolie's repressive form of adoption. Both outcomes jeopardize the sisters' harmony and threaten the unity of their family structure.

Medically speaking, dominant scientific discourses have regulated the definite connection between abortion and disability. Some women's acquired disabilities or fetal abnormalities have been determined as a ground for termination. On the other hand, it has always been considered difficult for women with disability to secure an abortion which is always contingent on medical diagnosis. In this regard, giving or denying access to abortion is determined by a registered medical practitioner with appropriate gynecological training. Thus, disabled women have been generally denied the right of informed consent to abortion and had to face conservative attitudes that question their capacity. Thus, abortion could be used to devalue women with disabilities and make them vulnerable to coercion. However, Corthron's dramaturgy presents a liberatory concept of impairment that displaces the taxonomy of disability as deviance through its relation with abortion and adoption.

Come Down Burning particularly presents a case of physical disability that excels in liberatory abortion. Despite being a cripple, Skoolie is acclaimed by her black community as the only woman who can skillfully perform abortion. Skoolie indoctrinates her own ethos that challenges the presentation of abortion as a marker of termination and stigma attached to black women. Instead, abortion becomes an empowering ritual that marks Black woman's holistic integration of body and spirit. Bink realizes the agency of such healthy transformation that Skoolie clearly celebrates:

Bink: If all the sudden, if all the sudden I start speakin' in tongues, if all the sudden the Holy Spirit come down burnin' me, come down burnin' me, I start speakin' in tongues-

Skoolie: Do whatcha have to, Bink. (2005:146)

Skoolie's practice of abortion also becomes a family rite that boosts the dignity and agency of Black motherhood and communal connection. Bink's request of performing abortion of her baby inducts collaboration between Skoolie and Tee in such a practice: "Mind if Tee come? I like the help" (2005:143). Skoolie's initiative transforms her from a repressive adopting mother into an "other mother" who acknowledges the role of the biological mother and helps Tee's family move forward. Skoolie's version of abortion also establishes a reconnection between Skoolie and Tee. The moment they discuss Tee's decision of abortion by integrating Skoolie's way, the two sisters design their communal act of interdependence:

Tee: Gonna hurt, Skoolie?

Skoolie: Tomorra? (Tee nods.) Maybe.

.....

Skoolie: So. Maybe we oughta call her boss. Principal.

Tee: He gonna say we gotta come down through. In person. (Stops stapling) I could carry ya, Skoolie.

Skoolie (Pause): You can't lift me.

Tee: Yes I can. (Starts to). (2005:148)

Moreover, Skoolie and Tee start to realize their elastic disability and potent power. They configure their own transformation of their physical and racial disabilities into a display of defiance, dignity, and self-worth. Tee asks Skoolie: "Pretend like all along I plan on bringin' you, tell 'em that. Pretend like we 's doin' this together, pretend like you ain't no bigger 'n me" (2005:149). Skoolie responds in a tone of mutual understanding: "Set me in a chair before any of 'em come, teacher, principal. Make sure my feet pointed

in the right direction; heels in the back” (149). Now Tee, by carrying and empowering Skoolie, and Skoolie, by forcefully defending Tee’s daughter, recognize their transgression of all social limitations. Such rebellion is performed through the sisters’ vision of bodily elasticity and the infinity of forms that challenge the socially constricting images of the disabled. In particular, Skoolie and Tee destabilize biologically constrictive notions of black motherhood by constructing an infinite and elastic form of black mothering that presents Skoolie as the othermother who helps hold Tee’s family structure together by her own ethics of resourcefulness, self-denial, and caring.

However, Corthron demonstrates how submission to social psychology that creates a pathological reality of Black maternal uncertainty entails effacement of elasticity and perpetuates disability that ends in rift and fatal abortion. Despite her empowering trip to the school and defiance of alleged parental disability, Tee succumbs again to the social construction of her maternal invalidity. Tee immediately questions her own motherhood when baby Jazzman does not take her breast milk: “Won’t take my milk, Skoolie, I don’t know, won’t take my milk” (2005:150). Tee’s projection of disability reactivates a discourse of binaries that validate Skoolie’s performance of authority and control. Tee’s submission to indetermination entitles Skoolie to enforce an alternative motherhood. Skoolie “grabs bottle and baby and begins to feed him” (150). Tee’s insistence on the milk problem transforms the sisters’ challenging narrative of empowering interdependence into a discourse of familial and communal rift:

Bink: Aw, let her hold her baby, Skoolie, don’t be so mean.

Skoolie: Better keep your mind on your business, Bink. (151)

Again, Tee retaliates and reminds Skoolie of her disability and physical limitation: “I could do it again, ya need me. You in my way, I could pick you up, move. Nothin’ you could do. You bother me, I pick you up” (151). Tee’s later challenging decision to leave Skoolie and draw a new road that foregrounds their isolation and where they will no longer perform their elasticity leads to a final scene of physical disability. Tee performs her self-induced abortion that ends in her traumatic death; Skoolie falls from her cart and becomes literally crippled (156). Thus, both Tee and Skoolie perform a socially repressive child abortion that becomes euphemism for crippled black motherhood and sisterhood, and ultimately precipitates further disability and death.

Conclusion:

Overall, Corthron presents a counter-discourse that displaces the interconnection between enforced genetic disability (as presented in *Cage Rhythm*), double disability (presented as both racial and physical limitation in *Come Down Burning*), abortion, and adoption that “others” black women. In Corthron’s plays, abortion and adoption have been presented as prospects of revolution. The plays undo the image of “monolithic” Western adoption and abortion experiences by exploring the particularities of diverse adoptive and abortive communities, cultures, and contexts. Such geographical expanse emphasizes the broad ranging social and cultural geographies and socio-political particularities of what have become problematically homogenized and reduced as Western adoptive and aborting ethos. So, Corthron’s plays expand our concerns to include not only forced adoption and abortion in their parallel institutions, such as foster care, orphanages, and technologically-assisted reproduction and hospitals, but also liberatory forms of relinquishment or family separation.

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