

*Towards Visual Activism*

We need a new way of seeing.<sup>1</sup> This is not in itself a novel suggestion; the aspiration for a new paradigm of looking has been a recurring theme of activist writing and scholarship at least since bell hooks' 1992 *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. In the final sentence of a chapter on 'the oppositional gaze' in that book, hooks makes a connection that will be crucial to the argument of this book – a connection that I have borrowed for the title of its Introduction – between 'looking and looking back'. For hooks, this phrase marks a shift from theorising a new model of activist spectatorship for Black women spectators, to imagining a future-focused model for historiography:

Looking and looking back, black women involve ourselves in a process whereby we see our history as counter-memory, using it as a way to know the present and invent the future.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the chapter, hooks advocates a mode of spectating that explicitly addresses itself against the politics of gazing. She writes her essay into a long tradition of contesting a totalising white gaze, drawing on Franz Fanon's now infamous formulation of the relationship between the white gaze and racialisation ('the glances of the Other fixed me there') and answering Stuart Hall's call for a more nuanced understanding of the agency of Black spectators.<sup>3</sup> For hooks, this 'oppositional gaze' is not new, but one that is well-established among 'subordinates in relations of power', since 'one learns to look a certain way in order to resist'.<sup>4</sup> In this final sentence, however, hooks shifts from setting out this model of resistant

<sup>1</sup> I use this phrase in deliberate echo of John Berger's 1972 television series, and book *Ways of Seeing*. The study of visibility takes place across multiple disciplines, but most acknowledge Berger's book as an important point in their disciplinary timelines. Cousins (2017) rewrites Berger's concept.

<sup>2</sup> hooks (2014), 131.

<sup>3</sup> Fanon (2008), 82. This edition is a translation of Fanon (1952) by Markmann; Hall (1989).

<sup>4</sup> hooks (2014), 116.

looking to draw a connection between activist spectatorship and activist approaches to the past.

The connection hooks makes here between the power-sensitive exchange, commonly referred to in the real world as looking and in the theatre as spectating (in the art world as gazing, in interpersonal encounters as staring, in criminology as witnessing...), and history underscores the double argument of this book. Just as looking is not a process of passive reception of meaning but rather active creation of it, so too is looking back an active and co-constructive process – which we have called in the previous chapter, ‘classical reception’. Both of these active processes bring with them ethical responsibilities, and carry within them the possibility of resistance. There is a long history to the ethics of looking both in the real world and in the theatre, with the figure of the bystander or witness often representing the complex dynamics of implication, complicity and power figured in the act of watching. In the theatre it is the history of the anti-theatrical prejudice that best exemplifies the various ways that looking has been prohibited and policed, whereas in the real world attempts to regulate who looks at what and how are most well-known from discussions of the dangers of watching pornography and violence on television, in video games or via the internet.<sup>5</sup> Drawing together some of these different forms of looking, Saidiya Hartman asks rhetorically in *Scenes of Subjection* (1997):

Is the act of witnessing a kind of looking no less entangled with the wielding of power and extraction of enjoyment?<sup>6</sup>

Power and extraction are key components of gazing – an assertion often ascribed to Michel Foucault, though the idea did not appear at a singular moment but across multiple disciplines with varying emphases, as we will see – but for hooks, another kind of looking is possible. The Black women spectators described by hooks refuse to accept conventional (and conventionally racist) representations of Black women characters on screen, and in so doing they commit to an ‘oppositional gaze’, a mode of resistant spectating that can ‘create alternative texts that are not solely reactions’.<sup>7</sup>

For hooks, the focus of this oppositional gaze is specifically directed at resisting racism, anti-blackness and in particular misogynoir, but a similar mode of resistant gazing has also been theorised in disability studies. In

<sup>5</sup> On the anti-theatrical prejudice see Barish (1981).

<sup>6</sup> Hartman (1997), 22.

<sup>7</sup> hooks (2014), 128. The point hooks makes here recalls the notion of ‘Black Spectatorship’ in the work of Manthia Diawara, see, for instance, Diawara (1988).

her book on staring, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson invites us to ‘become ethical starers’, and advocates a mode of resistant looking that she terms ‘visual activism’.<sup>8</sup> Garland-Thomson is writing against the assumption that the act of looking is in itself unethical (she takes issue with the way that staring is often simplistically dismissed as ‘rude’ in everyday life), and like hooks, she outlines an ethics of looking that uses the idea of the spectator’s active involvement as the key to more ethical watching. Like hooks and Garland-Thomson, Annette Kuhn also proposes an ethical model of spectating, where spectators read ‘against the grain’, and in so doing experience ‘the pleasure of resistance’:

the acts of analysis, of deconstruction and of reading ‘against the grain’ offer an additional pleasure – the pleasure of resistance, of saying ‘no’: not to unsophisticated enjoyment by ourselves and others of culturally dominant images, but to the structures of power which ask us to consume them uncritically and in highly circumscribed ways.<sup>9</sup>

Central to this resistant looking is the activity of the spectator, and the political power of this co-constructive activity has been frequently theorised in the art world. Tina M. Campt, for instance, in her 2021 book *A Black Gaze* describes ‘a gaze that requires effort and exertion’, and ‘shifts the optics of “looking at” to a politics of *looking with, through and alongside another*’.<sup>10</sup> Campt begins her book with a close reading of Jay-Z’s 2017 video *4.44*, comparing the spectating required of Jay-Z’s audiences with that required by the group of artists responsible for ‘this emergent Black gaze’ on which the rest of the book focuses. What connects *4.44* and these artists is, Campt argues,

their ability to make their audiences *work*. They refuse to create spectators, as it is neither easy nor indeed possible to passively consume their art. Their work requires *labor* – the labor of discomfort, feeling, positioning and repositioning – and solicits visceral responses to the visualization of Black precarity.<sup>11</sup>

The very notion of the spectator is misconceived, Campt implies here; the term ‘spectator’ assumes a passivity on the part of the viewer that the artists of the Black gaze movement reject. A spectator theorised as active rather than passive gains an agency that allows them to resist.

<sup>8</sup> Garland-Thomson (2009), 188; the term ‘visual activism’ is used throughout the book.

<sup>9</sup> Kuhn (1985).

<sup>10</sup> Campt (2021), 8. In her 2012 book, Campt also outlined a form of spectating as labour through affective investment in images.

<sup>11</sup> Campt (2021), 17.

The criticism that Maaike Bleeker makes of the ‘disembodied notion of vision’ in theatre studies (in her 2008 book, *Visuality in the Theatre: The Locus of Looking*) also takes as its starting point the misconception that spectators are passive.<sup>12</sup> In fact, Bleeker chooses the term ‘seer’ over ‘spectator’ precisely because, in her view, spectating ‘has come to be associated with passivity’.<sup>13</sup> The fact that the term ‘seer’ – in classics at least – carries connotations of a supernatural kind of vision, prophecy, haruspicy or divination is useful for Bleeker, for whom ‘seeing always involves projections, fantasies, desires and fears, and might be closer to hallucinating than we think’.<sup>14</sup> When it comes to the ways in which spectators (or seers) make meaning out of bodies, Bleeker rejects a view-from-nowhere approach to understandings of spectating. ‘The focus’, she remarks ‘has been on the bodies of actors and not on the bodies of spectators, with meaning resulting exclusively from the body present onstage’.<sup>15</sup> This is a problem, Bleeker argues in a later essay that she co-wrote with Iris Germano, because bodies – and the power structures that affect how they interact with the world around them – shape how we understand what we see. Metaphors, Bleeker and Germano argue,

evolve in reaction to bodily experiences and exist in our embodied brains. This has consequences for a spectator of the theatre, as we can argue that these already twice-embodied metaphors are re-embodied in the materiality of the theatrical performance, thus creating complex feedback loops between the bodily experience of watching a performance, and the embodied concepts through which we process that experience.<sup>16</sup>

Spectating, for Bleeker and Germano, is an active process because it is an embodied one; because the ways in which spectators make meaning out of bodies in performance are shaped by their own embodied experiences in the real world. Put simply, when we look at a body in the theatre we do not watch as disembodied sensory organs, but as embodied processors shaping and imagining what we see in front of us in light of our own power-sensitive expectations. Spectatorship needs to be ‘situated’, like knowledge, to use Donna Haraway’s term, and understood to be an active and constructive interaction that takes place among structures of power. The rest of this chapter – in pursuit of what Garland-Thomson terms ‘visual activism’ and hooks terms ‘the oppositional gaze’ – will name some of those structures of power and advocate a model for viewing that resists them.

<sup>12</sup> Bleeker (2008), 3.

<sup>13</sup> Bleeker (2008), 18.

<sup>14</sup> Bleeker (2008), 18.

<sup>15</sup> Bleeker (2008), 3.

<sup>16</sup> Bleeker and Germano (2014), 370.

But Camp't's discussion of 4.44 is an important introduction for this chapter not only because of the way that she details the mechanics of what she calls the 'Black gaze' but also because she returns us to the link that hooks forges between looking and looking back. The demands that 4.44 makes of its spectator are not only emotional and interpretative ('discomfort, feeling' in Camp't's terms) but also those of tradition-building ('positioning and repositioning'). The video begins with a young boy on the back seat of a moving car singing the opening lines of Nina Simone's 1965 'Feeling Good', and the film is an eight-minute-long collage that mixes everyday experiences of love and loss (via grainy home movies) with dance footage, images of police brutality, portraits of Black feminist theorists, and clips from the 1915 white supremacist silent film *The Birth of a Nation*, among many other kinds of footage. 'Watching 4.44 isn't easy', Camp't writes: 'It doesn't tell a story.... You have to work to understand the connections between its various clips and sequences.'<sup>17</sup> In Camp't's reading, 4.44 requires its spectators to co-construct meaning by severing the existing associations that the clips bring into the film (to 'reject traditional ways of seeing blackness', she explains<sup>18</sup>) in order to build new connections and associations – to resignify the clips, by imagining other relations for them. In other words, much like an assemblage, this filmic montage denaturalises dominant traditions, and makes its viewers aware that they are committed to co-constructing meaning.

The point Camp't makes here about looking therefore has an obvious parallel for classical reception; resistant looking opens up the possibility for resistant looking back. Resistant spectators actively refuse to be complicit in ways of seeing that are white supremacist (for hooks and Camp't) or ableist (for Garland-Thomson). These ways of seeing, and the methods of meaning-making on which they rely, are fundamentally colonial. Visual activism therefore has an important role to play in what might be called decolonising both looking and looking back. And this activist approach to looking and looking back is not only a tool in the scholarly kit – we have seen in the previous chapter and will remind ourselves throughout this book that cultural constructions about bodies and difference have dangerous effects in real life – but also one that has the ambition to change the world around us. 'Not only will I stare', writes hooks, 'I want my look to change reality'.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Camp't (2021), 16.

<sup>18</sup> Camp't (2021), 17.

<sup>19</sup> hooks (2014), 116.

## Colonial Constructions

In ancient world studies, theorising and historicising around bodily difference is more well-known with respect to race and racialisation than with respect to disability.<sup>20</sup> It has long been acknowledged that racial categorisation was a feature of colonial projects that sought to weaponise physical difference in the service of establishing a regime of power – these practices are commonly grouped together under the heading ‘race science’.<sup>21</sup> Humans are infinitely variable in their embodiments, but race science categorised physical variation and offered it as a site for meaning-making and as a justification for hierarchisation and inequality. Aníbal Quijano famously explained, in the course of his work on the coloniality of power, how the colonisation of the land that is now called America entailed

codification of the differences between conquerors and conquered in the idea of ‘race’, a supposedly biological structure that placed some in a natural situation of inferiority to others.<sup>22</sup>

In the same chapter Quijano goes on to describe how perceptions of physical difference became racialised as they were encoded into a system that was designed so as to be constitutive of a hierarchical ordering of the world.<sup>23</sup> These processes of categorising bodies did not only result in a system of races, but also in a network of overlapping systems of race, ability and gender, which are increasingly being understood as interconnected social categories curated by coloniality.<sup>24</sup> For María Lugones, gender is a colonial system, that took its example from colonial racialisation and in particular from the way in which superiority and inferiority were imagined – via this process of racialisation – as biological.<sup>25</sup> This false conception of biological determinism is for Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí a peculiar Western construction that had no place in Yorubaland before

<sup>20</sup> Research into disability in antiquity is not new, but race has been a more frequently discussed aspect of identity at all levels of the discipline thanks to work by Kennedy, Roy and Goldman (2013), among others, to produce teaching materials on race and classics. Much more remains to be done around both topics: see McCoskey (2021).

<sup>21</sup> On the history of race science see Saini (2019).

<sup>22</sup> Quijano (2000), 533. And this process of codification is not at all restricted to American history, as Manias (2013), especially 391–448 shows.

<sup>23</sup> And on the biopolitics of empire at the level of relation (focusing on posthuman interactions, viral contagion, etc.) see Ahuja (2016).

<sup>24</sup> This work on the interconnected histories of oppression and categorisation increasingly overlaps with critical animal studies too – for instance, see Taylor, S. (2017), Boisseron (2018) and Jackson (2020).

<sup>25</sup> Lugones (2007). See also Connell (2014) on the ‘gender order’ and its relationship to power and coloniality.

colonisation. In ‘Western thought’, Oyěwùmí argues, ‘those in positions of power find it imperative to establish their superior biology’ and ‘those who are different are seen as genetically inferior and this, in turn, is used to account for their disadvantaged social positions’.<sup>26</sup> For Oyěwùmí, as for Campt, hooks and Garland-Thomson, this categorisation comes about through a process of gazing – a Western gaze: ‘The body is given a logic of its own. It is believed that just by looking at it one can tell a person’s beliefs and social position or lack thereof.’<sup>27</sup> In this opening statement of her argument, Oyěwùmí builds on the explanation Elizabeth Grosz gives of the process by which ‘the body becomes a text, a system of signs to be deciphered, read and read into. Social law is incarnated, “corporealized” ...’.<sup>28</sup> Just as race science sought to biologise social categories (to corporealise it, in Grosz’s terms), Western thought, for Oyěwùmí, biologised gender and in so doing gave a pseudo-scientific explanation to socially produced inequalities. What connects these theorists is the conviction that reading bodies for meaning is a fundamentally colonial process through which colonial powers sustained (and biologised) the socially produced hierarchy that underpins the notion of empire.

The case has similarly been made that disability was falsely constructed as a biological category so as to provide a pseudo-scientific justification for inequality. In their study of eugenics, Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchell describe the pseudo-science as ‘a mutual project of human exclusions’ (including gendered, racist and ableist exclusions) and give the term ‘Eugenic Atlantic’ (drawing on Paul Gilroy’s ‘Black Atlantic’) to the period between 1800 and 1945.<sup>29</sup> Eugenics presented disabled people as biologically inferior to enabled people, and as defective when compared with the idealised bodies of enabled people. And although Snyder and Mitchell begin their analysis with the most well-known area of influence of openly eugenicist policies – Nazi medicine – they argue that the construction of biologised categories ultimately had its origins in the taxonomic pseudo-sciences of racialization, citing Carl Linnaeus and the taxonomy of race as one possible origin point for the idea of in-built biological inferiority.<sup>30</sup> Racism and ableism are not the same, and

<sup>26</sup> Oyěwùmí (1997), 1.

<sup>27</sup> Oyěwùmí (1997), 1.

<sup>28</sup> Grosz (1994), 198. More recently, McKittrick (2021) has written of the related process of ‘narrative biologizing’.

<sup>29</sup> Snyder and Mitchell (2006), 101. Gilroy (1995). McGuire (2020) similarly sees bodily difference given meaning by a eugenics-inspired focus on measuring, but dates this to the interwar period.

<sup>30</sup> Snyder and Mitchell (2006), 106–8.

Snyder and Mitchell issue an important warning to us not to dissolve the differences between the two:

discriminatory practices against racial populations are not identical with those enacted on disabled people, [though] eugenic ideology nonetheless exhibited racist components, and racist ideologies can tell us something about the cultural construction of disability.<sup>31</sup>

But these processes of categorisation have in common a desire to present the inequality that was a key strategy of empire (and would be equally useful to the logics of what Cedric J. Robinson famously called ‘racial capitalism’<sup>32</sup>) as the result of physiological or biological inferiority.<sup>33</sup> This entanglement is apparent from the methods of resistance proposed by Campt, Garland-Thomson and hooks, cited above; visual activism emerges as a disruptive mode of looking shaped as much by the rejection of the white gaze (as in Campt and hooks’ work) as by the rejection of the enabled gaze (as in Garland-Thomson’s).<sup>34</sup> The coloniality of disability as a category is often taken for granted – the World Health Organisation’s statistic that 80 per cent of the world’s disabled population live in the Global South is a much-repeated maxim.<sup>35</sup> But ancient world studies has not yet thrown off these methods of reading bodies for meaning that perpetuate the colonial biologising of inequality.

Snyder and Mitchell’s geographic focus is specifically on the Atlantic, but writing of blindness in colonial India, Aparna Nair notes similarly that the British census was the tool that not only established ‘infirmity’ as a bodily (and pseudo-biological) category, but also designed a method for making meaning out of disability.<sup>36</sup> ‘The census represents the beginning of the legibility of the disabled body within the colonial and postcolonial Indian

<sup>31</sup> Snyder and Mitchell (2006), 101. On the relationship between anti-racism and the disability justice movement, see Parker (2015), Pickens (2017) and Erkulwater (2018).

<sup>32</sup> Throughout Robinson (1983).

<sup>33</sup> See Baynton (2001) on disability positioned as natural justification for inequality, Dolmage (2018) on the relationship between disability and immigration policies and Blackie and Turner (2018) on the relationship between disability, work and capitalism during the Industrial Revolution. Tyler (2022) shows that American racial segregation (the colour line) functioned by imagining Black people to be innately disabled and their embodiment unsuited for freedom.

<sup>34</sup> Ghai (2003), 157, describes an able-bodied gaze.

<sup>35</sup> For this statistic, see: [www.who.int/en/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/disability-and-health](http://www.who.int/en/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/disability-and-health). Disability studies have made much more of this connection, with many arguing for the importance of relating decolonial theory with disability studies – for instance, see Grech and Soldatic (2015), Imada (2017) and Dirth and Adams (2019). Erevelles (2011) addresses the intersections between disability, race and gender in an explicitly global context.

<sup>36</sup> Nair’s argument, that the British census established disability as a biological category is similar to the process of racialisation Shah (2015) sees the British census as responsible for in Malaysia, where Islam became synonymous with the racialised ‘Malay’ census category.



states' she remarks.<sup>37</sup> Colonial records did not only enumerate various types of illness or impairment but also imagined their aetiologies, ascribing to them medicalised as well as social pathologies, and making them meaningful within a colonial civilising narrative.<sup>38</sup> 'Blindness was constructed as the natural corporeal cost of "Indian" backwardness, apathy and ignorance', Nair continues.<sup>39</sup> European colonisers brought with them their own practices of making disability meaningful, which differed from those that circulated among colonised people. Nair gives the example of blind Muslims who memorised the whole of the Qur'an, becoming a *hafiz*, a practice so frequent for blind people that the 1901 Census for the Punjab presents the term *hafiz* as equivalent in 'native usage' to other terms denoting visual impairment. For European colonisers on the other hand the blindness of the *huffaz* was exploited for meaning and taken as an indication that the *hafiz* lacked real understanding of the text they had memorised.<sup>40</sup> In indigenist studies, scholars have often described a similar process whereby the notion of impairment and the idea that it could be narratively read was imposed onto indigenous people as an instrument of coloniality.<sup>41</sup>

Nair is far from alone in seeing the history of disability as inseparable from the history of colonialism. Fikru Negash Gebrekidan, in his article on disability justice organising by blind people in Kenya, sees the silence of African studies on disability as surprising, given that

African studies itself emerged in reaction to theories of social Darwinism and the pseudoscience of race, in which blacks were portrayed in terms of intellectual, moral and physical deformity.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Nair (2017), 185. On disability in India see further Ghosh (2016). Miles (2000) also sees disability in Asia operating outside of European conceptual categories though unhelpfully views 'the Asian tradition' as a monolith that one must cross a 'cultural bridge' (605) to get to, and this model limits his analysis.

<sup>38</sup> And this colonial disablement was not limited to the British Empire; see also Chang (2019) on the intersection between ableism and Spanish imperialism. Chang's current project, provisionally entitled 'Able-Empire' will no doubt explore this further.

<sup>39</sup> Nair (2017), 189.

<sup>40</sup> Nair (2017), 190ff.

<sup>41</sup> See Norris (2014) on this. Cajege (2000) uses the concept of interdependence to offer an alternative definition for normalcy. See also Lovern and Locust (2013) and Weaver (2015) on Native American (to use the authors' own terms) experiences of disability. See Senier (2021) for an overview of the field of indigenous disability studies.

<sup>42</sup> Gebrekidan (2012), 105. Gebrekidan's argument is worth comparing with that of Chander (2014), who also positions self-advocacy and organising by blind people as crucial to the disability justice movement, in Chander's case in twentieth-century India. Since Gebrekidan's article, studies of disability in African countries have become more common (and more focused on the role of coloniality) – for instance, see Brégain (2016), Verstraete, Verhaegen and Depaep (2017) and Grischow (2018). Before Gebrekidan, see also Livingston (2006) and Checknoue-Amarouche (2010).

Colonialism, in Gebrekidan's view, did not simply establish these categories pseudo-scientifically, but also rendered them meaningful with respect to labour and the exploitation of human, natural and agricultural resources: 'monetization conferred a market value on a productive healthy physique', Gebrekidan points out.<sup>43</sup> For European colonisers disability had an economic meaning, since disabled people troubled the exploitative relationship established between bodies and extracted value, and this further animated the cyclical argument that positioned both race and disability as markers of pseudo-biological inferiority. Colonialism, its techniques of economic extraction and concomitant focus on productivity, functioned as a closed hermeneutic system that resignified physical difference to its own benefit. This economic reasoning – the importance of bodies-for-profit to the colonial extractive economy – is the most common explanation for European empires' keen interest in reifying the categorisation of race and disability. But for the remaining chapters of this book, another explanation is equally pressing. For George Yancy, the colonial categorisation of bodies is not just an economic one, but is also enacted through a process of gazing.

Refuting Abdul JanMohamed's insistence that 'the perception of racial difference is, in the first place, influenced by economic motives', Yancy focuses instead on the discursive and ideological aspects of the categorisation of difference.<sup>44</sup> JanMohamed's economic explanation is, for Yancy, only part of the story. In tandem with the economic argument, Yancy sees the colonial gaze providing some of the explanation for this resignifying of difference:

The white colonial gaze is that broadly construed epistemic perspective, a process of seeing without being seen, that constructs the Black body into its own colonial imaginary. Masking any foul play, the colonizer strives to encourage the colonized to embrace his/her existential predicament as natural and immutable. The idea is to get the colonized to accept the colonialists' point of reference as the only point of reference.<sup>45</sup>

Yancy begins his article with a reference to Aimé Césaire's well-known equation 'colonization = thingification', and in so doing makes immediately apparent the relationship between colonialism and the gaze.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Gebrekidan (2012), 107. See also Earnshaw (1995) on the way that conviction and incarceration – like work – could make disability meaningful, in the context of colonised Australia.

<sup>44</sup> JanMohamed (1986), 80.

<sup>45</sup> Yancy (2008), 6. See also Lamming (2005), 57–85 'A Way of Seeing', first published in 1960, which similarly positions colonialism as a strategy of gazing, and begins with a quotation from *King Lear*.

<sup>46</sup> Césaire trans. Pinkham (2000), 42. Césaire's essay was first published in French in 1950.

Gazing had of course been understood to be a gendered process of objectification at least since John Berger's description of gendered gazing in *Ways of Seeing* (1972), and Laura Mulvey's articulation of the 'male gaze' in an essay that is now a classic of feminist film theory, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975). The colonial gaze, then, is a totalising vision for the world, that naturalises hierarchies and inequalities and presents them as resulting from difference constructed as biological. Like other modes of gazing it also objectifies the viewed, transforming them into an object that can be read for an explanation of their situation. Many of the attributes of this colonial gaze – 'mythos, codification, ritual, ontologization, constructivity, stereotypification and over-determination' according to Yancy – will also play a key role in the processes of attributing meaning to disabled characters in the theatre examined in this book.<sup>47</sup> Throughout the rest of this book the examples of reading blindness for meaning are taken predominantly from European plays and theatrical contexts; in the previous chapter I explained that this resulted in part from practicality – with the exception of Arabic, the modern languages that I am able to read are all European. But Yancy's colonial gaze provides a further explanation; reading physical difference for meaning is a visual reflex of domination, and it is therefore unsurprising that the majority of examples should come from the theatres of European colonial powers, at various points in their histories.

Oyèwùmí's attribution of this kind of pseudo-biological determinism to 'Western thought' specifically, though, is not the argument of this book. It is certainly not the case that ableist readings of the bodies of disabled people are only found in Europe, or the so-called West, to use Oyèwùmí's term, and I am wary of establishing a linear tradition or reception history for this readerly reflex. There have been numerous attempts to construct a tradition for this mode of reading bodies. Mohammed Ghaly, exploring the attitudes in Islamic theology and jurisprudence towards disabled people, traces the idea that physical difference is meaningful to the *Physiognomonics*, once thought to be by Aristotle (but now assumed to be the work of a different author). For Ghaly, it is possible to isolate those schools of Islamic jurisprudence that have been inspired by translations of the *Physiognomonics* (the Shâfi and Hanbali schools) from those that have not (most notably Sufism) – since only the former shared what Ghaly understands to be a fundamentally Greek physiognomic conviction that 'any malformation in one's body indicates a similar one in one's

<sup>47</sup> Yancy (2008), 7.

character'.<sup>48</sup> This conviction, Ghaly notes, 'found its way into Arabic literature which made use of or was influenced by such works' either through translation or some other mode of reception. The structure of Ghaly's argument is a familiar one for scholars of classical reception, with Muslim jurists in his reading receiving pseudo-Aristotle's approach to bodies via their translation of pseudo-Aristotle's words, constructing a chain of reception that explains the persistence of this ableist mode of reading bodies within particular schools of Islamic jurisprudence. But the result is a civilisational analysis: certain groups of people are positioned as influenced by this apparently Greek discriminatory technique of meaning-making, and others simply are not – just as for Oyèwùmí certain people (the so-called 'West') understood societal inequalities via the framework of biological determinism and others (Oyèwùmí mentions the people of pre-colonial Yorubaland specifically) did not.

This particular argument structure – that reading bodies for meaning is the practice of certain groups of people (often styled as 'civilisations') and not of others – is also the one used by Fedwa Malti-Douglas in her chapter on blindness in Mamlūk depictions of blind characters. 'It will be the purpose of this study', Malti-Douglas writes,

to show that the physical handicap of blindness serves as a kind of metaphor for a significant group of concepts, values and ideals in medieval Islamic civilisation.<sup>49</sup>

Throughout the chapter Malti-Douglas takes care to point out specifically where she perceives 'Islamic civilisation' to differ from Europe, giving, for instance, the example of blind prophets such as Tiresias and Homer who exist, in her view, only 'in the West'.<sup>50</sup> Her approach is a self-avowedly structuralist one, setting its sights on establishing a Mamlūk-specific 'mental structure concerning blindness' – and this is unsurprising given her chapter's context.<sup>51</sup> It appears in a 1989 edited volume that carries the subtitle 'Essays in Honour of Bernard Lewis', author of perhaps the second most famous attempt (after Samuel Huntington's infamous *Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order*) to establish a deep-seated and irreconcilable, violent civilisational difference between the so-called civilisations he terms 'Islam' and 'the West'.<sup>52</sup> This structuralist ordering of

<sup>48</sup> Ghaly (2010), 170.

<sup>49</sup> Malti-Douglas (1989), 211.

<sup>50</sup> Malti-Douglas (1989), 226.

<sup>51</sup> Malti-Douglas (1989), 214.

<sup>52</sup> Huntington (1996). The book was developed from a lecture Huntington gave in 1992. Lewis (1993).

the West vs the Rest remains popular for its simplicity and Eurocentrism, though in some quarters it is increasingly understood that this logic was motivated by an Islamophobic desire to position Muslims outside of Europe, and paint them as engaged in a violent, inevitable and unavoidable opposition to non-Muslims.<sup>53</sup>

Civilisational analysis of this kind is popular not only for its structuralist simplicity but also for its availability; it is no doubt true that the pseudo-Aristotelian *Physiognomonics* text contains abundant examples of bodies being read for meaning.<sup>54</sup> Taking their example from animals, the author argues that a person's disposition is legible from the form of their body:

And among all animals, those who know each species well can describe their qualities from their forms, equestrians with horses, hunters with dogs. Now if this is true (and it certainly is true) then there must be such a thing as physiognomy.<sup>55</sup>

And much of the treatise is taken up with examples of the ways bodies can be read as indicators of a person's character (e.g. soft hair indicating timidity, light skin colour indicating a good disposition (806b), a flat stomach indicating bravery (807a), bloodshot eyelids indicating shamelessness (807b) etc.). Even outside of pseudo-Aristotle, a reception history of reading bodies for meaning could be traced via Polemon of Laodicea and the survival of his treatise on physiognomy in Arabic, Greek and Latin.<sup>56</sup> But to construct such a reception history and explain away the colonial weaponising of physical difference as simply a remnant of antiquity that is the special inheritance of certain groups of people would be to dangerously depoliticise the persistence of this mode of reading bodies, and to neglect its role in the subjugation of disabled people.

As Martha Rose points out in her book on disability in the ancient world, the idea that the Greeks had a single view on disability that could subsequently be inherited by any given group of people is a convenient fiction:

<sup>53</sup> Lewis' Islamophobia is perhaps most evident in Lewis (1990). For instance, see Dabashi (2018). Dabashi's book on the subject, *The End of Two Illusions: Islam and the West* was due to be in print in 2022 but was not published by the time of writing this book. Within his own lifetime, Lewis was often taken to task by Edward Said in a series of public debates, referred to throughout Said (1997).

<sup>54</sup> For some basic refutations of analysis grounded in civilisational difference, see Appiah (2016) and Mazlish (2004).

<sup>55</sup> *Physiognomonics*, 805a.

<sup>56</sup> On Polemon of Laodicea see Swain (2007). The proto-structuralist grouping of humans into fixed personality types is also apparent to Theophrastus, though he is less interested in bodies.

Classicists and nonclassicists alike are quick to remember that the Greek Classical ideal included the notion of the perfectly proportioned human body and to conclude that all disabled people who varied significantly from this ideal must have been uniformly reviled. Modern assumptions that disabled people are inherently flawed, less capable, and unfortunate distort any reading of ancient historical material.<sup>57</sup>

Rose's study goes on to show that experiences of disability in the real ancient world rarely reflected the assumptions modern readers have of what they might have been like. Taking my cue from the gap that Rose points to – between what some ancient Greeks really thought about disability, and what it has been convenient for some modern people to assume that they thought – I am interested here in the politics of remembering. Why are classicists and non-classicists alike so quick to remember the physiognomics-inspired eugenicist approaches to disability apparent in a small number of ancient texts – and why these, over the wide variety of other approaches to physical difference evident across the ancient world? Who wants to remember 'the Greeks' in this way? And who does this civilisational analysis serve? Here, Oyèwùmí's clarification of her own civilisational analysis is particularly important: what she means by 'Western thought', she clarifies, is that *'those in positions of power find it imperative to establish their superior biology'*.<sup>58</sup> Alongside Oyèwùmí, then, I understand this mode of reading bodies not as a characteristic belonging to a particular essentialised group of people or to certain culture, or so-called 'civilisations' – Europeans or Mamlūks or Hanafis or 'the West' – but as a reflex of empowered readers and spectators.

### Reading Bodies with the Classical

Ableism and racism are not the same, but both contain within them a dehumanising urge to position certain people as outside the boundaries of humanity, a category defined with political expediency to include the most empowered. The relationship between this dehumanising and the humanism that has often functioned as shorthand for an extensively documented interest in classical material around which studies of European literary culture from the fourteenth century onwards have often focused, has been relatively understudied. But the notion that there is a connection between classical humanism and dehumanisation – particularly anti-Black and racist dehumanisation – has

<sup>57</sup> Rose (2003), 2.

<sup>58</sup> Oyèwùmí (1997), 1.

been a recurring concern in the discipline of Black studies, with the Jamaican cultural theorist Sylvia Wynter most famously placing the connection central to her work on the inadequacy and inequity of the human as category. In what has become perhaps her most famous essay, published in 2003 but drawing together readings of Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire and others who she had been reading and writing about for much longer, Wynter attempted to grapple with what she understood to be a key epistemological foundation of coloniality: a wilful misdefinition of 'the Human'. In the essay, 'Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Truth/Power/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, its Overrepresentation', Wynter makes the argument that certain people are over-represented within the definition of 'the Human'. Far from being a natural-biological category, or a universal one, the Human is in Wynter's reading a discursive category for which she provides a genealogy that is first religious, and then secular. 'We shall therefore need though', she summarised in an interview with Katherine McKittrick,

if my wager is right, to relativise the West's hitherto secular liberal mono-humanist conception of our being human, its over-representation as the being human itself.<sup>59</sup>

Key to this dehumanising of certain groups of people is, for Wynter, a definition of the Human that has always – wilfully – refused the inclusion of certain humans within the category. And this misidentification is not something that she sites in the distant past. In 1994, Wynter wrote an open letter to her colleagues about a report she had read detailing the beating of Rodney King, who had been a victim of the police brutality of the Los Angeles Police Department in 1991. The detail of the case to which she draws her colleagues' attention is the use of the acronym NHI:

The report stated that public officials of the judicial system of Los Angeles routinely used the acronym N.H.I to refer to any case involving a breach of the rights of young Black males who belong to the jobless category of the inner city ghettos. N.H.I. means 'no humans involved'.<sup>60</sup>

And when Wynter came, in her 2003 essay, to explain how this exclusionary category came to be established, she lay the blame squarely at a particular humanist way of studying the ancient world – one that we might today (though Wynter does not use this term) call 'classics'. In the essay she sets up what she calls the 'degodding' of Humanism, stressing that the racialisation process by which certain humans were dehumanised came about because

<sup>59</sup> McKittrick (2014), 31.

<sup>60</sup> Wynter (1994), 42.

the new idea of order was now to be defined in terms of degrees of rational perfection / imperfection and degrees ostensibly ordained by the Greco-Christian cultural construct deployed ... as that of the law of nature.<sup>61</sup>

The notion that certain humans do not meet the definition of the Human that was so key to colonialism's extractive violence is explained, by Wynter, as a deliberate misuse of a Greek-inspired ideal as if it were a natural-biological category. She cites Anthony Pagden's explanation of the way that colonialism found its structural support in the theologian John Mair's translation of Aristotle:

The suggestion that the Indians might be slaves by nature—a suggestion which claimed to answer questions concerning both their political and their legal status—was first advanced as a solution to a political dilemma: by what right had the crown of Castile occupied and enslaved the inhabitants of territories to which it could make no prior claims based on history? ... [John Mair's text adapted from Aristotle's *Politics*] was immediately recognized by some Spaniards as offering a final solution to their problem. Mair had, in effect, established that the Christians' claims to sovereignty over certain pagans could be said to rest on the nature of the people being conquered, instead of on the supposed juridical rights of the conquerors. He thus avoided the inevitable and alarming deduction to be drawn from an application of these arguments: namely that the Spaniards had no right whatsoever to be in America.<sup>62</sup>

Wynter concludes herself that

it is therefore the very humanist strategy of returning to the pagan thought of Greece and Rome for arguments to legitimate the state's rise to hegemony ... that now provides a model for the invention of a by-nature difference between "natural masters" and "natural slaves".<sup>63</sup>

Wynter's argument here is not that Aristotle is himself uniquely genocidal, or that the texts commonly attributed to the ancient Greeks and the Romans are intrinsically bad. Rather, her point is that a particular humanist mode of returning to them – something roughly akin to what we might call classics – built the epistemological scaffolding for the dehumanisation practices of empire, enabling difference that in actual fact was discursively established to be presented as a natural-biological justification for subjugation. The danger, in Wynter's reading, is in the way in which the classical has persisted – a particular mode of looking back – rather than in the texts and objects usually thought of as classical in themselves.

<sup>61</sup> Wynter (2003), 296.

<sup>62</sup> Cited in Wynter (2003), 283.

<sup>63</sup> Wynter (2003), 297.



And although the connection between humanism and dehumanising has been relatively underdiscussed within the field of classics, within the study of enslavement it has often been pointed out that connections between racism and ableism were made under empire by a particular mode of returning to the classical. In her 2020 book, *Between Fitness and Death: Disability and Slavery in the Caribbean*, Stefanie Hunt-Kennedy takes issue, as I have done in this book, with attempts to read meaning into physical difference, naming this – as I have done in this book – as a reflex of coloniality. Hunt-Kennedy shows how ‘meanings’ of Blackness were discursively established into the position of seeming natural–biological, and used to provide a justification for the subjugation and enslavement of Black people. Like Wynter, she provides a classical explanation for the colonial practice of situating Black people outside of humanity. Ideas of monstrosity ‘from ancient texts and fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Spanish and Portuguese travel narratives’ were applied to the bodies of African people in order to justify their enslavement, she shows, and traces how the making of race was intertwined with ableism because both depended on a classical imaginary of monstrosity.<sup>64</sup> Crucially, physical difference was not always, in this plantation logic, positioned as disabling, but could also be fetishised as a kind of superability of the enslaved person; but both the idea that Black bodies were deficient and the idea that they were superhumanly powerful were weaponised as justification for the enslavement of Black people.

Plantation dehumanising, in Hunt-Kennedy’s reading, lays bare a connection between racism and ableism (‘ability itself has a raced history’, she summarises), and this connection is not metaphorical – much of her book focuses on the ways in which plantations and plantocracy produced impairment in their violent treatment of enslaved people. But in her first chapter she considers the way that dehumanising was discursively established through literary and cultural sources, a process she frames as an inheritance narrative (‘inheriting monstrosity’ is the title). Drawing connections, for instance, between Pliny’s descriptions of the one-eyed Arimaspi of northern Scythia and Walter Raleigh’s descriptions of the indigenous people of Guyana as people with their eyes in their shoulders, Hunt-Kennedy shows not only how ancient texts inspired empire’s dehumanising, but also how a particular mode of looking back justified the violences of colonialism and the enslavement of people. The triangular relationship between classical travel narratives, early modern ethnography

<sup>64</sup> Hunt-Kennedy (2020), 7.

and designations of certain people as ‘monstrous’ is also a key thread in Surekha Davies’ 2016 book *Renaissance Ethnography and the Invention of the Human*. Davies outlines three ‘textual prototypes from classical antiquity’ used to position people living in places colonised by European settlers as monstrous.<sup>65</sup> She recounts how Renaissance ethnographers took the idea of the monster as an error in nature from Aristotle’s *Generation of Animals*, the sense that the birth of a monster was a sign of impending danger from Cicero’s *On Divination* and the idea that monsters are wonders of nature who live at the far corners of the earth from Pliny’s *Natural History*.<sup>66</sup> ‘The boundaries of the category of the human were murky in classical antiquity and continued to be so for its heirs’, Davies writes.<sup>67</sup> And although Davies positions these three works from antiquity as one important influence on Renaissance ethnography, the dehumanising process required to sustain the extractive logics of empire were not the result of Aristotle, Cicero and Pliny alone. The emphasis Davies places on the ‘heirs’ of antiquity (which she understands to include early Christian and Muslim writing in particular, as well as other literary–cultural evidence) returns us to Wynter’s explanation of this exclusionary category of the Human as something that can be found in antiquity but is continuously reactivated in postclassical contexts. For both Davies and Wynter, this exclusionary notion of the human exists in antiquity, but their point is not to set up Greek and Roman antiquity as the origin point for dehumanisation. The humanist mode of looking back to the ancient world is just as responsible for the Human’s dehumanising potential as Aristotle, Cicero and Pliny themselves.

A similar series of chronopolitical questions have often been framed around the idea of the norm. In disability studies, the term ‘normate body’ (rather than ‘normal body’) is often used to refuse and denaturalise the idea that certain bodies are by nature ‘normal’ and to draw attention to the discursive establishment of the norm. Disability studies scholar Lennard Davis explains:

A common assumption would be that some category of the norm must have always existed. After all, people seem to have an inherent desire to compare themselves to others. But the idea of a norm is less a condition of human nature than it is a feature of a certain kind of society.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Davies (2016), 30.

<sup>66</sup> And on the relationship between ancient colonialism and ancient ethnography see Bosak-Schroeder (2020).

<sup>67</sup> Davies (2016), 41. See also Hanafi (2000) on the Renaissance and the monster.

<sup>68</sup> Davis (2006), 3.

Davis goes on to present the notion of the norm as arising in the nineteenth century, at the same time as the terms ‘normal’, ‘normality’, ‘norm’, ‘average’, and ‘abnormal’ began to be recorded as a lexicographical trend in English after 1840, when an increasingly quantitative approach began to be taken to bodies, motivated by industrialisation and profit.<sup>69</sup> Davis sets the notion of the ‘norm’ against the classical notion of the ideal body, and argues for a temporal specificity to the normate body; before industrialisation, he argues, the ideal was by definition unachievable, whereas the post-industrialisation normate body was not only expected but also enforced.<sup>70</sup> Davis’ argument constructs time differently to Davies or Wynter, signalling a rupture between the ancient past and the nineteenth century. But the Human, as Davies and Wynter show, functioned as a kind of norm, which became under empire a series of expectations of bodies (codified as race, gender and ability) that functioned as a means of excluding certain people from the category of humanity.

It would be convenient for the discipline of classics to position this ableist mode of reading bodies only as a reflex of empire – or industrialisation – and in so doing to exonerate ancient authors from involvement in these dehumanising discourses. But it would be equally convenient for the perpetuation of these dangerous approaches to bodies in the modern world to establish origin points for them in antiquity and offer them to the postclassical world as ideas so old and hallowed that they pass as aspects of human nature, or even as universal. Classical reception has frequently navigated both of these chronopolitical positions. And it is here that Wynter’s reading of the Human as an exclusionary idea produced by a particular kind of humanist retrospective (which we might call – though Wynter does not – classicism) rather than by the texts and artefacts of the ancient Greeks themselves, is most instructive. If the ‘heirs’ (to use Davies’ term) of the ancient Greeks and Romans are simply their passive inheritors, then the classical tradition simply serves to establish the origin story – or family tree – of these exclusionary ideas. By refusing to assume a self-evident classical tradition, assemblage-thinking offers a route to an analysis much more closely aligned with Wynter’s, asking not where these ideas come from but which modes of looking back bring them into focus most clearly, and for whose benefit. The assemblage offers a temporal position that will allow us to deconstruct the seeming neutrality of the classical tradition, and of the humanist retrospective gaze.

<sup>69</sup> Cameron (2014), 107–9 explains this in an introductory way, see also Corbett (1991) and Davis (2006).

<sup>70</sup> See also Cryle and Stephens (2017) for a critical genealogy of the idea of the norm.

## Against Inheritance

Rejections of Lewis-esque structuralist narratives of the West vs the Rest are beginning to permeate in ancient-world studies, though the imaginative construction of Europe and North America as uniquely influenced by ancient Greece, and later ancient Rome, that held sway for much of the discipline's history has not wholly vanished. It is still relatively common for the notion of a tradition to be used to describe classical reception, a structuralist model that persists even though the discipline's official break with source study has long been considered mainstream. This formulation of reception studies (concerned with establishing where X author got Y idea *from*) although widespread within the discipline usually called 'classics', seems to have come about in spite of the potential transformation that Charles Martindale saw reception's focus on the receiver's active role bringing about in his *Redeeming the Text: Latin Poetry and the Hermeneutics of Reception* (1993). Martindale, who is widely credited with the popularisation of reception studies in the Anglophone study of the ancient world, has on a number of occasions since 1993 reminded readers that:

it is worth remembering that reception was chosen, in place of words like 'tradition' or 'heritage' precisely to stress the active role played by receivers.<sup>71</sup>

But this active reader seems to have been centred only rarely, and the refusal of scholars in reception studies to take seriously the provocations that Martindale read in Jauss and Iser led Martindale to remark – somewhat defeatistly – that:

it is worth asking if the concept of reception today serves any useful purpose, now that the word's power to provoke has largely subsided.<sup>72</sup>

By 1993, Martindale could hardly have been said to be alone in wanting to site the activity of meaning-making in the reader rather than in the text. Stanley Fish's *Is There a Text in this Class?* (1980) had signalled, in English Studies at least, a relatively trendy return to the question that had been lurking in hermeneutics under various guises for much longer.<sup>73</sup> Nor is he

<sup>71</sup> Martindale in Martindale and Thomas (2006), 11.

<sup>72</sup> Martindale in Martindale and Thomas (2006), 11. There have of course been works of classical reception that *have* explored the potential for it to be a discipline focused on the active role of the reader. Those wishing to find the 'power to provoke' that Martindale sees as having subsided might point, for instance, to Malik (2020) on the invention of Nero as antichrist by readers in late antiquity.

<sup>73</sup> The Victorian Shakespeare critic A.C. Bradley (1904), 381, for instance, simply takes for granted that critics ought not to read enjambement for meaning because 'readers will differ, one making a distinct pause where another does not'.

now alone in wondering whether the paradigm of reception studies retains any of its ‘power to provoke’, with Johanna Hanink calling in 2017, for instance, for a Reception 2.0 or a ‘critical classical reception’ that has ‘an open activist agenda’.<sup>74</sup> The structure of a tradition has proven difficult for classical reception studies to shake off, with even recent work relying on an inheritance narrative as its organising principle. That inheritance narratives are exclusionary is evident from the way that they necessarily exclude so as to present a falsely singular narrative. The 2010 volume entitled *The Classical Tradition* edited by Anthony Grafton, Glen W. Most and Salvatore Settis, for instance, begins:

This book aims to provide a reliable and wide-ranging guide to the reception of classical Graeco-Roman antiquity in all its dimensions in later cultures. Understandings and misunderstandings of ancient Greek and Roman literature, philosophy, art, architecture, history, politics, religion, science and public and private life have shaped the cultures of medieval and modern Europe and of the nations that derived from them – and they have helped to shape other cultural traditions as well, Jewish, Islamic, and Slavic, to name only these. Every domain of post-classical life and thought has been profoundly influenced by ancient models.<sup>75</sup>

The very notion of a classical tradition is premised on the construction of a false boundary between the ‘European’ (which seems here to include those places formerly colonised by Europeans – the ‘nations that derived from’ medieval and modern Europe) and the rest of the world, a category that includes in this example specifically Jewish, Islamic and Slavic ‘cultural traditions’. Grafton, Most and Settis do not speak in the terms of Lewis and Huntington’s West vs the Rest here, but the structural similarities are obvious; the Rest is further away from the classical than the West in their model.

There is a coloniality to classical reception’s structuralism. By causing ‘the classical’ to appear to have special relevance only to Europe and the places Europe colonised, the classical tradition naturalises European supremacy, making it seem inevitable and premised on a special family relationship with ancient Greece and Rome. The classical tradition is a totalising mode of looking back, a rear-view mirror in which the viewer sees only a colonial world order reflected. Looking back, refracted through this metaphor, comes to be structured around a particular imaginary of time – a timeline, or pseudo-genealogy, where modern Europe (and by extension North America) constitute the privileged inheritors of Greece

<sup>74</sup> Hanink (2017).

<sup>75</sup> Grafton, Most and Settis (2010), vii.

and Rome. As the authors of the *Postclassicisms* (2019) book point out, it is the way classicism structures time that permits antiquity to be entered into in this kind of programmatic relationship with the unequal present:

In classicism's perspective, antiquity has the power to model the here and now. Classicism is founded thus on a narrative of time and, more specifically, on how we in the present are located in time.<sup>76</sup>

Classicism – or the idea that it is antiquity that constructs the present – results from a particular way of understanding time. The authors of the *Postclassicisms* book do not go as far as to outline what the 'narrative of time' that permits this modelling is, criticising instead certain kinds of affective relations to the classical past (longing, inheritance, idealisation, etc.). But elsewhere, in academic disciplines that have specifically activist beginnings, such as queer studies and disability studies, it has long been apparent that passive inheritance is the trick of a particular chronopolitical structure.

In queer studies, the refusal of linear time has often taken the form of a critique of historicism. In her 2013 article on 'the new unhistoricism' in queer studies, Valerie Traub sums up the way that queer studies have responded to 'the specter of teleology', placing new unhistoricism between 'a teleological perspective' that 'views the present as a necessary outcome of the past – the point towards which all prior events were trending' and 'the antiteleologists' who

challenge any such proleptic sequence as a straitjacketing of sex, time and history, and they announce their critique as a decisive break from previous theories and methods of queer history.<sup>77</sup>

Assemblage-thinking is a model that, like unhistoricism, queries the genealogy that is often taken for granted in classical reception studies and refuses to accept its teleological organisation as neutral. Rather, by taking up Martindale's invitation to return the reader–receiver–spectator to the centre of meaning-making, it unpicks the ideological nature of time's supposed linear motion from past to present. Critiques of temporal linearity are now standard in queer historiography, as Madhavi Menon makes clear when she writes in 'Period Cramps' (2009) that 'time does not necessarily move from past to future, backward to forward'.<sup>78</sup> But despite the fact

<sup>76</sup> The Postclassicisms Collective (2020), 20. See also Porter (2006), 17 who similarly asks 'don't we have to admit that that the postclassical era in some sense *invented* the classical age?' and addresses the role of classicism as a narrative of time.

<sup>77</sup> Traub (2013), 21.

<sup>78</sup> Menon (2009), 233.

that the ‘backward gaze’ (the subtitle of the collection of essays in which Menon’s ‘Period Cramps’ appears) has for some time now been invoked in discussions of classical reception that take Orpheus as their starting point (see, for instance, Shane Butler’s 2009 ‘The Backward Glance’), classical reception has yet to reckon seriously with temporality beyond a forward motion from past to present.

The idea that time might move in some other way is not unheard of in reception studies. Chiara Thumiger, for instance, in a 2013 article subtitled ‘Ancient Reception of Modern Drama’ brings to her analysis of Eugène Ionesco and the *Bacchae* an awareness of ‘the backward stream that is also part of reception’, picking up on what was already, according to Anna-Marie Jagose, a part of queer temporality:

a mode of inhabiting time that is attentive to the recursive eddies and back-to-the-future loops that often pass undetected or uncherished beneath the official narrations of the linear sequence that is taken to structure normative life.<sup>79</sup>

But even in high-profile recent studies of classical reception whose authors have admitted that the linearity of time is not straightforward (as the authors of the *Postclassicisms* volume do, and as Ingo Gildenhard, Michael Silk and Rosemary Barrow do in their 2013 book *The Classical Tradition: Art, Literature, Thought*),<sup>80</sup> the ‘recursive eddies’ of temporality are positioned as if the apparatus of time were an immovable part of the natural world. Influence is presumed to flow from one text to another, past to present, and even when a reader is permitted to be momentarily outside of linear time (as in Thumiger’s work), these influences are understood to lie like a natural resource waiting to be discovered by the classical reception scholar. This mode of understanding temporality neglects the role that the reader–receiver–spectator plays in constructing time in a particular way so as to create meaningful relationships, rather than simply to read pre-existing influences – a problem assemblage-thinking helps to redress.

Disability studies have, like queer studies, given some thought to the idea of an activist temporality, known in disability-justice movements as well as in disability studies as ‘crip time’. In *Organise Your Own Temporality* (2017), Rasheedah Phillips confronts the question of the future of liberation movements, drawing from Michelle M. Wright’s *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology* (2015) the problems that a linear

<sup>79</sup> Thumiger (2013), 40; Jagose (2009), 158.

<sup>80</sup> Gildenhard, Silk and Barrow (2013), 5.

timeline poses for justice movements. In her essay, Phillips notes a number of connected justice movements that have required a radical rewriting of the linear narrative of time, beginning with feminist takes on time, including Irma Garcia's assertion that women's time is responsible for 'disrupting pre-established schemes and structures' and concluding with Afrofuturism's understanding that 'our position from the present creates what the past and future look like, what it means at every moment'.<sup>81</sup> Phillips does not mention 'queer time' or the disability justice movement's 'crip time' or 'sick time', all three modes of 'chronopolitical resistance' which have similarly taken their inspiration from the idea that the seeming objectivity of the linear passage of time from past to present to future is an instrument of capitalism and imperialism.<sup>82</sup> Crip time in particular has drawn attention to the fact that normative time (or linear time) sustains and perpetuates a series of oppressive assumptions, and is linked to the way that capitalism values bodies for their productivity. As Alison Kafer explains:

Crip time is flex time not just expanded but exploded: it requires reimagining our notions of what can and should happen in time, or recognizing how expectations of 'how long things take' are based on very particular minds and bodies.<sup>83</sup>

Crip time sets itself against the temporal regime of exploitative capitalism, which, as Marta Russell among others has shown, transformed the body into a machine of productivity, with disabled people becoming under such structures 'workers whose impairments add to the cost of production'.<sup>84</sup> Crip time – crucially – asks the question *cui bono?* (for whose benefit?) of normative temporal regimes, uncovering the stakes of their ordering.

That temporal regimes can obfuscate processes of exploitation is equally apparent in postcolonial readings of temporality. Giordano Nanni (2012) writes of the way that the colonisation of time cultures through the establishment of Greenwich Meantime (GMT) provided the temporal conditions for the enslavement of people and the stealing of land and resources under colonialism. 'Clocks', he reminds us, 'do not keep *the* time, but *a* time', specifically 'the necessary culture of time for building empires', a

<sup>81</sup> Phillips (2017).

<sup>82</sup> On crip time and sick time see Fazeli (2016).

<sup>83</sup> Kafer (2013), 27.

<sup>84</sup> Russell (2019), 15. On capitalism and disability see also Clifford (2020), and on the relationship between neoliberalism, capitalism and expectations of the body see Cooper (2008). On the entwined histories of disability and labour see Rose (2017) and Ó Catháin (2006) on the blind workers' protest movement in Derry.



process he refers to by analogy with the colonial model of religious missionary work as ‘temporal conversion’.<sup>85</sup> Clock time may have created the necessary time culture for empire building, but it also, as David Landes has noted of the invention of the clock in medieval Europe, ‘made possible, for better or for worse, a civilisation attentive to the passage of time, hence to productivity and performance’.<sup>86</sup> That time cultures make possible both settler–colonial empire-building and capitalist productivity is not unsurprising – capitalism and imperialism are twin processes in so far as they both exploit bodies for their productivity and categorise physical difference. But *crip time*, in its demand to ‘bend the clock to meet disabled minds and bodies’ rather than ‘to bend disabled minds and bodies to meet the clock’, does not simply exempt disabled people from the time culture of capitalist productivity. It interrogates the notion of progress or the forward motion of time itself, showing it to be an oppressive normative structuring of time.

In attempting to reformulate classical reception away from linear time and metaphors of inheritance in this book, I am issuing a warning against what I see as the biggest danger of classical reception: that of providing (or seeming to provide) an origin story for any given aspect of modernity. Allowing classical reception to be understood according to a linear temporality that hands the ideologies of the past to the present and future allows readers and receivers of antiquity to exempt themselves from ethical culpability when they receive discriminatory attitudes from the past. Oppressive normative ideologies are not simply passed down to the present from the past, rather time is imagined as linear so as to cause the perpetuation of such ideologies to appear simply an accident of temporality. Shifting our understanding of the reader–receiver’s involvement explicitly from reception to co-creation returns their ethical responsibility for these ideologies to them. Although in this book the discriminatory attitude recreated from antiquity will be ableism, the point that literature can serve to naturalise discriminatory attitudes has been much more frequently made about racism, with Audre Lorde famously noting for instance that mainstream communication

wants racism to be accepted as an immutable given in the fabric of existence, like evening time or the common cold.<sup>87</sup>

That literature can do the work of positioning a discriminatory logic as an ‘immutable given’ has long been clear to philosophers in justice-centred

<sup>85</sup> Nanni (2012), 1.

<sup>86</sup> Landes (1983), 1.

<sup>87</sup> Lorde (1981), 281.

disciplines. Gloria Anzaldúa for instance reminds us that ‘nothing happens in the “real” world unless it first happens in the images in our heads’ and Pratibha Parmar has noted that:

Images play a crucial role in defining and controlling the political and social power to which both individuals and marginalized groups have access. The deeply ideological nature of imagery determines not only how other people think about us but how we think about ourselves.<sup>88</sup>

And classical reception is beginning to learn that temporal positioning can be a political act and can serve to establish certain kinds of ideological biases as neutral or natural within the discipline (see, for instance, Shane Butler’s recent unpicking of the temporal positioning of the ‘we’ of Richard Jenkens and Simon Goldhill’s work on classics and the Victorians).<sup>89</sup>

But the notion of linear time has placed classical reception into discovery mode, and it has too often focused on the search for origins rather than interrogated the political nature of origin-positioning.<sup>90</sup> Stuart Hall, in *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* (1996), proposes an approach to the past that takes into account the self-positioning of the historian’s ‘looking back’:

Cultural identity ... is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as ‘being’. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere ‘recovery’ of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.<sup>91</sup>

The sorts of ableist logics discussed in this book, like cultural identities, in Hall’s argument, do have histories. But those histories are not fixed and the ideologies are not forced upon modern readers. Rather, they resurface when modern readers attempt what Hall calls a ‘mere recovery’ of the past. Ableism becomes all the more powerful when a classical origin can be created for it, and it can be, as Lorde noted of racism, ‘accepted as an immutable given in the fabric of existence’.

<sup>88</sup> Anzaldúa (1987), 87. Parmar cited in hooks (2014), 5.

<sup>89</sup> Butler (2019).

<sup>90</sup> I use the term ‘discovery’ here deliberately for its echo of colonial exploration narratives, recalling the way in which colonisers presented their land grabs as tales of discovery.

<sup>91</sup> Hall (1990), 225.

In their final collective work, *What Is Philosophy?* (1991, not long before Guattari's death in August 1992), Deleuze and Guattari brought their earlier thinking around assemblages to bear on the question of why people hold opinions (in the conclusion to the book, entitled 'From Chaos to the Brain'). In the opening lines of their conclusion, they restate the 'infinite variabilities' that characterised their assemblages, and note that humans create fixed relationships between ideas because of these infinite variabilities:

These are infinite *variabilities*, the appearing and disappearing of which coincide. They are infinite speeds that blend into the immobility of the colorless and silent nothingness they traverse, without nature or thought. This is the instant of which we do not know whether it is too long or too short for a time. We receive sudden jolts that beat like arteries. We constantly lose our ideas. This is why we want to hang on to fixed opinions so much. We ask only that our ideas are linked together according to a minimum of constant rules. All that the association of ideas has ever meant is providing us with these protective rules – resemblance, contiguity, causality – which enable us to put some order into ideas ...<sup>92</sup>

Here and throughout their work, Deleuze and Guattari focus on becoming, rather than being in the construction of ideas, just as Hall emphasises the importance of becoming in the temporal location of cultural identity. And although Deleuze and Guattari go on to distinguish philosophy and science from this pattern of opinion-making, what is apparent from their description of the ordering of variabilities here is that the 'protective rules' that stratify variabilities – resemblance, contiguity and causality – are at the core of reception studies. But whereas Deleuze and Guattari invite us to see these as tools for the subjective ordering of infinite variabilities, in classical reception we are more accustomed to treating them as the instruments of describing really-existing relation. Deconstructing them in this way would allow us to ask ethical questions about the subjective ordering of infinite variabilities (or assemblages) into reception histories, and to uncover the stakes of this ordering.

Deleuze and Guattari's images here, and in *A Thousand Plateaus*, are spatial (throughout the rest of the chapter they refer to 'planes' that are imposed onto chaos, just as in *A Thousand Plateaus* they had referred to lines drawn within assemblages) and this helps us to understand the coloniality of time by analogy with the coloniality of space. That power (and particularly colonial power) has misordered how we conceive of

<sup>92</sup> Deleuze and Guattari trans. Burchell and Tomlinson (1994), 201.

geographical space has long been a topos of poetry. Kei Miller's 2014 collection *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion* takes the form of a conversation between a cartographer adamant that 'what I do is science. I show / the earth as it is, without bias' and 'the rastaman' who 'has another reasoning'.<sup>93</sup> Miller's collection was hardly the first to have engaged with the idea of a colonial geography distorting spatial knowledge (and indeed his collection begins by quoting lines from Louise Bennett's address to the cartographers of the world map: 'Fi stop draw Jamaica small'). But one of the poems in the collection recalls specifically a moment when the colonial biases of cartography went viral in 2010. In a poem dedicated to Kai Krause, Miller writes:

For the rastaman – it is true – dismisses  
too easily the cartographic view;  
believes himself slighted  
by its imperial gaze. And the ras says  
*it's all a Babylon conspiracy*  
*de bloodclawt immappancy of dis world -*  
maps which throughout time have gripped like girdles  
to make his people smaller than they were.<sup>94</sup>

The billionaire software engineer Kai Krause had, in December 2010, lamented the 'immappancy' of American schoolchildren, who when surveyed, had agreed in the majority that America's land area was the 'largest in the world'. In response, Krause had designed a map (which became common knowledge to many after it went viral on social media) that he thought would set right this 'immappancy', drawing the land mass of the African continent encompassing within it the areas of the USA, China, India, Japan and all of Europe combined, so as to give a more realistic sense of its true size.<sup>95</sup>

Krause's map was also the occasion for his coining of the term 'immappancy', which, by analogy with terms like 'illiteracy' and 'innumeracy' designated 'insufficient geographical knowledge'.<sup>96</sup> And although Krause does not use the term for anti-colonial critique, Miller's use of it designates not simply an insufficiency of geographical knowledge, but the way that the mapping of space, despite its claims to objectivity, can naturalise the racist and colonial ideologies involved in its structuring. Immappancy,

<sup>93</sup> Miller (2014), 17, 18.

<sup>94</sup> Miller (2014), 21.

<sup>95</sup> Krause (2010).

<sup>96</sup> Krause (2010).

I am arguing here, ought to have a temporal equivalent: a way of expressing that the way that we tell the time and the way that we bring ideas or texts together across time is a political act structured by power (and in particular colonial and capitalist exploitation, evident from crip time's critique). Discriminatory power structures map time just as much as they map space, and like the Mercator projection that Bennett and Miller critique, the objective nature of a linear influence from past to present that classical reception assumes erases the way that those power structures have been naturalised into the tools of the discipline.

The disruption of 'chrononormativity' (to use Elizabeth Freeman's term) brings with it a renewed conception of history, catalysed by those who had 'the experience of being relegated to what we might think of as positions out of time', as Rahul Rao (2020) points out at the beginning of his book *Out of Time: The Queer Politics of Postcoloniality*.<sup>97</sup> Queer history has often confronted head-on the politics of remembering, with Heather Love explaining in the opening paragraphs of her 2007 book *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* that:

For groups constituted by historical injury, the challenge is to engage with the past without being destroyed by it. Sometimes it seems it would be better to move on – to let, as Marx wrote, the dead bury the dead. But it is the damaging aspects of the past that tend to stay with us, and the desire to forget may itself be a symptom of haunting. The dead can bury the dead all day long and still not be done.<sup>98</sup>

In disability-studies-led interactions with the past – like queer-studies-led interactions with the past – there is a lot at stake in the idea of history. 'Historically' as Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell point out, 'disabled people have been the objects of study but not the purveyors of the knowledge base of disability', and so it is unsurprising that narratives of history and processes of historicising have tended to elevate to the level of neutrality ableist assumptions about disability.<sup>99</sup> For queer studies, Rao proposes a solution, a critical attention to the way that 'memory, and haunting in particular, does not pretend to provide an authoritative account of the past'.<sup>100</sup> Rao establishes a distinction between history and memory, showing that memory can undermine narratives that claim objectivity or

<sup>97</sup> Freeman (2010); Rao (2020), 1.

<sup>98</sup> Love (2007), 1.

<sup>99</sup> Snyder and Mitchell (2006), 198.

<sup>100</sup> Rao (2020), 23. Rao points to Gordon (1997) on haunting – Gordon (1997), 148, describes haunting in terms that recall assemblage-thinking, referring to 'the constellation of connections' for example.

neutrality because it centres the idea of its own subjectivity and partiality. In so doing, it opens up conversations about the operation of power and hegemony:

what becomes evident is that memory is less a treasure trove of stories than a battleground on which competing accounts joust for hegemony. The point of the turn to memory is not that it promises to end conflict, but that it sometimes offers queers a more hospitable terrain for it.<sup>101</sup>

Memory, in Rao's reading – like assemblage-thinking – focuses on the partiality of histories, or reception histories, and as such it provides a useful model to counter the source-study-influenced paradigm of reception as an archaeology of texts that aims at uncovering some kind of objective set of influences or intertextual connections. The political work required 'to reckon with being haunted' as Johanna Hedva puts it in a passage quoted in the Introduction to this book, is also that of constructing a model of temporality that refuses to accept inheritance's seeming neutrality.

Whereas ideas of 'reception' or 'tradition' imagine relationships between the classical and the postclassical structured along a line moving from past to present, assemblage-thinking, memory or haunting invite a nonlinear understanding of history that is constructed by the subjective reader–receiver, at the behest of various power structures. Those unequal structures of power (of which ableism will be the most referred to in this book) are always eternally available, an inevitability familiar within understandings of time that are not focused on linearity (like the 'Everywhen' of Indigenous Australian mythology, for instance, or Donna Haraway's 'elsewhen'<sup>102</sup>). But the revival of these unequal power structures is not a natural or inevitable process. It is the subjective choice of a particular reader–receiver–spectator. Assemblages interrogate not simply the objects remembered, but the ethical act of making meaning through a specific process of co-remembering, and the temporal regime that is created to sustain this meaning-making. They ask us to pay attention to the ways time has been structured so as to naturalise oppressive regimes: capitalism, white supremacy, ableism and other regimes that privilege normate bodies. Assemblage-thinking offers classical reception the opportunity to make ethical demands of the reader–receiver, who no longer passively inherits but actively chooses to remember. And since assemblages are not themselves already organised by temporality, they

<sup>101</sup> Rao (2020), 23.

<sup>102</sup> Haraway (2016).

place the ethical weight of temporal organisation onto the reader–receiver, refusing the idea that ableist, capitalist, colonial or otherwise oppressive formulations of temporality are natural or neutral. Assemblages offer the opportunity for classical reception to – to use Phillips’ terms – organise its own temporality, demanding not only that we invest ‘looking back’ with a kind of ‘visual activism’, but also that we inscribe it within an activist temporality.

### Implicated Spectators

Assemblage-thinking makes clear that the power of classical texts does not lay hidden in any given text itself, reactivated accidentally by an innocent modern reader. Rather its power is by turns purposefully invoked or summoned through a complicity (willing or unwilling) with larger power structures: and in both cases, ethical responsibility for the wielding of this power rests with the reader–receiver. Crucial to Alexander Weheliye’s use of assemblage thinking in his 2014 book *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* is his insistence that assemblages are not models for ‘silencing questions of power’ and ought properly to be read as ‘structured in political, economic, social, racial and heteropatriarchal dominance’.<sup>103</sup> Assemblages do not provide a model of a flat ontology (to use Manuel DeLanda’s term<sup>104</sup>) outside of relations of power – and as such they are tied to some notion of historicism, despite not being governed by linear time. Reader–receivers are not passively inheriting the power relations of an ancient world, but they are subject to the power structures of their own time (we will see a number of examples of paratexts that play a role in reanimating a particular discriminatory logic in this book: the medieval church, discourse on the nature of early modern performance, and the Iraq war, among many others). Spectators throughout the history of the theatre have taken up theatre-makers’ cues to imagine that blindness is emblematic of and / or results from a series of related conditions: special knowledge, closeness to death, immorality, impiety, excessive or deviant sexual behaviours, and falsehood or pretence. There are dangerous (and often deadly) real-world consequences to each of these associations, as we will see in the chapters of this book, but despite repeated reminders – such as the one issued by Susan Sontag which we read in the Introduction, that

<sup>103</sup> Weheliye (2014), 49.

<sup>104</sup> DeLanda (2002) – Ash (2020) traces the term ‘flat ontology’ to Bhaskar (1978), though there are significant differences between the two philosophers’ usages of the term.

‘metaphors and myths, I was convinced, kill’ – these metaphors continue to be perpetuated.<sup>105</sup> Assemblage-thinking therefore requires a model of viewing that takes seriously the ethical implication of the spectator in perpetuating these tropes – both in their own active choices, and also in their complicity with larger power structures.

For Michael Rothberg, our ability to understand this implication in power, privilege and violence lacks adequate vocabulary. In his 2019 book *The Implicated Subject*, he theorises a model of ethical responsibility that reaches beyond the binary of victim vs perpetrator to set out ‘implicated subjects’ who:

... occupy positions aligned with power and privilege without being themselves direct agents of harm; they contribute to, inhabit, inherit or benefit from regimes of domination but do not originate or control such regimes. An implicated subject is neither a victim nor a perpetrator, but rather a participant in histories and social formations that generate the positions of victim and perpetrator, and yet in which most people do not occupy such clear-cut roles. [...] Although indirect or belated, their actions and inactions help produce and reproduce the positions of victims and perpetrators. In other words, implicated subjects help propagate the legacies of historical violence and prop up the structures of inequality that mar the present; apparently direct forms of violence turn out to rely on indirection.<sup>106</sup>

Rothberg’s use of the term ‘violence’ here is not restricted specifically to isolated instances of physical force or power, but following Lauren Berlant he is invested in ethical implication in ‘the ordinary of violence’, giving the example of ‘a responsibility to reflect on and act against our implication in a system of racial hierarchy that we enable’.<sup>107</sup> He draws a distinction between legal implication and ethical implication, explaining that the forms of implication he is interested in ‘rarely rise to the level of indictable offense, but confronting them constitutes one of the most urgent political tasks of our time’.<sup>108</sup> Implication, in his reading, does not require consciousness on the implicated subject’s part of their involvement in injustice (and indeed it is often the case, he shows, that implication is unconscious or denied and responsibility for it disavowed). But what is crucial to his elaboration of this concept is the positioning of implication in time:

<sup>105</sup> Sontag (1978), 102.

<sup>106</sup> Rothberg (2019), 1–2. Rothberg draws heavily from the framing of collective responsibility by Hannah Arendt, but begins his analysis with real-life violence – the killing of Trayvon Martin.

<sup>107</sup> Berlant uses this term in Evans (2018) but elaborates on the content throughout Berlant (2011). Rothberg (2019), 10.

<sup>108</sup> Rothberg (2019), 10.



implication is produced and reproduced diachronically and synchronically: segregation has a history, and overcoming it will require not just an end to policies of discrimination in the present, but also an active reconstruction of the historically sedimented layers of society.<sup>109</sup>

And just as Rao had argued that memory can be a resource for queering totalising narratives of history, memory is also, for Rothberg, a key resource that ‘can help make implication visible’.<sup>110</sup>

Rothberg’s concept is an important one for this book, because it prohibits simplistic disavowals of responsibility of the kind that are common in popular reactionary responses to ethical implication in historical events (e.g. ‘but how can *I* be responsible for an injustice that happened before I was born?’). Implicity is different to complicity, for Rothberg, because it does not depend on a legal structure of responsibility: ‘We are implicated in the past, I argue throughout this book, but we cannot be complicit in crimes that took place before our birth’ he states.<sup>111</sup> As well as the positions of victim and perpetrator, Rothberg’s model allows us to draw attention to the position of ‘beneficiary’, who ‘profits from the historical suffering of others as well as from contemporary inequality in an age of global, neoliberal capitalism’.<sup>112</sup> This implicated subject position, with its focus on the beneficiary rather than the perpetrator, is important for the refusal of what in decolonial studies has often been termed ‘innocence’, or ‘violent innocence’; in the terms of Carrie Tirado Bramen –

the psychological mechanism necessary to create a white Christian settler nation, where innocence is regenerative and disavowal represents a habitual mode of thinking.<sup>113</sup>

The core question of my book, posed in the Introduction, is – simply put – why does it continue to be so common for meaning to be made out of disability in ways that cause harm, despite widespread knowledge that this practice is harmful? In resolving the question of why violence, exploitation and domination persist, Rothberg offers one possible response:

<sup>109</sup> Rothberg (2019), 11. Here he takes the example of segregation because he is drawing on the language of the Kerner Commission Report of 1968.

<sup>110</sup> Rothberg (2019), 11.

<sup>111</sup> Rothberg (2019), 14.

<sup>112</sup> Rothberg (2019), 14. The status of the beneficiary has been much commented on in genocide studies in particular – see, for instance, Robbins (2017) and Mamdani (1996).

<sup>113</sup> Bramen (2017), 25, presents this as a psychoanalytical concept, whereas in decolonial theory more broadly it has more often been connected with the self-perpetuation of structural whiteness, for example, in Wekker (2016) or Sullivan and Tuana (2007). Sedgwick famously called this ‘the privilege of unknowing’, see Sedgwick (1993).

... a fundamental argument of this book is that such things are 'still' possible not because some restricted group of demonic individuals continues to perpetrate extreme evil, but because most people deny, look away from, or simply accept the benefits of evil in both its extreme and everyday forms.... The things we are experiencing are 'still' possible as well because most people refuse to see how they are implicated in – have inherited and benefited from – historical injustices: synchronic and diachronic injustices are intertwined.<sup>114</sup>

These metaphors continue to persist and to cause harm, to bring Rothberg's analysis to bear on our question, because implicated subjects continue to engage with the methods of meaning-making that they understand themselves to have inherited.

And it is precisely in this language of inheritance that Rothberg's model is most useful for reshaping classical reception. Though Rothberg does not go as far as to say that it is the model of inheritance itself that is a core part of the problem, he does hold the implicated subject responsible for a linear model of inheritance, which he calls not 'the classical tradition' but 'the transmission belt of domination':

Foregrounding implication instead of victimhood or perpetration allows us to emphasize the dynamic interplay between subjectivity, structural inequality, and historical violence; supplement absolutist moral ascriptions with more nuanced accounts of power; and above all, leave behind the detached and disinterested spectators who dominate discussions of distant suffering in favour of entangled, impure subjects of historical and political responsibility. The implicated subject, we will see, is a transmission belt of domination.<sup>115</sup>

The second chapter of Rothberg's book is entitled 'On (Not) Being a Descendant', drawing attention to his refusal of genealogical narratives that make use of a passive inheritance model to disavow responsibility. There, Rothberg turns his attention to the afterlife of the enslavement of people, sketching out the implication-through-inheritance not only of those who stood in (literal) genealogical relation to enslavers but also

those of us with a nongenealogical relation to slavery who nevertheless find ourselves entwined in the aftermath, either because of our racial privilege, our financial interests, our migration into a postslavery situation, or because we too, as scholars, trade in the archives of slavery.<sup>116</sup>

<sup>114</sup> Rothberg (2019), 20.

<sup>115</sup> Rothberg (2019), 35.

<sup>116</sup> Rothberg (2019), 79.

His analysis leads him to reframe reparations, asking not how the modern world ought to determine what enslaved people and their descendants *lost* but

how we can address the ‘gain’ that beneficiaries profit from by virtue of a history that [...] they have not caused, but which has caused them.<sup>117</sup>

The relevance of Rothberg’s model for classicists more generally is obvious (that classics as a discipline *gained* from empire is without doubt), but his implicated subject also offers us an analogue that will be important for understanding the ethical responsibility of the reader–receiver–spectator throughout this book. Spectators who participate in the forms of meaning-making with which this book is concerned may not be the first cause (or even the perpetrators) of ableism – but they are implicated in the harm that these processes of meaning-making contribute to, both diachronically (because their involvement in reproducing them is not a passive inheritance) and synchronically (because they engage in them in the present). In addition, Rothberg’s model also helps us to cope with the heterogeneity and multiplicity of an audience: ‘implicated subjects neither possess an identity nor arise from a process of identification (‘we are all X’), Rothberg writes.<sup>118</sup>

Rather, to be an implicated subject is to occupy a particular type of *subject position* in a history of injustice or a structure of inequality – a history or structure one may enter, like an immigrant, long after the injustice at issue has been initiated, or, like a beneficiary of global capitalism, far from its epicenter of exploitation. Just as the subject positions any given person occupies are necessarily multiple, the forms of implication in which people find themselves are frequently crosscutting. Although some people are consistently and systematically privileged (or de-privileged) by the intersectional nature of social categories [...], most people find themselves caught between legacies and actualities that project more complex and ambiguous patterns.<sup>119</sup>

Like Oyèwùmí, who – as we saw above in this chapter – understood biological determinism to be a reflex not of a particular essentialised group but of ‘those in positions of power’, Rothberg too refuses to treat the position of implicated subject as a characteristic of people in a particular identity group. Rather, implicated subjects exist always in relation to power; you are an implicated spectator because you occupy a particular position of power, not because of who you are (though spectators with certain characteristics may be more likely than others to occupy these powerful

<sup>117</sup> Rothberg (2019), 83.

<sup>118</sup> Rothberg (2019), 48.

<sup>119</sup> Rothberg (2019), 48.

positions). Framing the implicated subject – and the implicated spectator, the variation on Rothberg’s model that we will use in this book – as a subject position relative to power makes it possible to use this model in tandem with assemblage-thinking and to historicise it where necessary.

### The Limits of Vision

Although he does not frame them in this way, many of the issues that Rothberg raises in *The Implicated Subject* have been part of decolonial writing about vision and objectivity. Over the course of this chapter, leaning on disciplines where these points are already established, I have tried to explore how a wrongful assumption of neutrality (or objectivity) perpetuates coloniality; discrimination against disabled people, like European supremacy, is the product of an ideology that is narrativised into the position of seeming neutral and inevitable (by a series of intersecting narratives: the classical tradition, inheritance, linear time, progress and productivity...). This unmasking of a false claim to objectivity has also been directed at vision itself, with Boaventura de Sousa Santos remarking, in his 2018 book *The End of the Cognitive Empire* that ‘sight is one of the senses most in need of being decolonized’.<sup>120</sup> After summarising some of the ways in which sight comes to be misinterpreted as a kind of totalising objectivity (e.g. in Michel Foucault’s ‘panopticon’), de Sousa Santos coins the term ‘Deep Seeing’ to describe a two-way process of active seeing. This argument is made equally by Alexander Weheliye in a 2005 book, where he traces the history of Afrocentric refutations of ‘the hegemony of vision in Western modernity’, and shows that this scholarly refutation pre-dates the now infamous writing on the gaze by Jacques Lacan and others.<sup>121</sup> Deep Seeing, de Sousa Santos explains, resists the temptations of the panopticon: it is a mode of seeing that is aware of its own situatedness, subjectivity and partiality, and in which the seer not only questions their own construction of the seen but is also ‘willing to see what she does not actually see’.<sup>122</sup>

<sup>120</sup> de Sousa Santos (2018), 170. Shortly before this book went to press – according to a statement made by the Centre for Social Studies at the University of Coimbra on the 14th April 2023 – Boaventura de Sousa Santos was suspended from his position following allegations of “sexual misconduct” pending the conclusion of an ongoing investigation (see: <https://ces.uc.pt/en/agenda-noticias/destaques/2023/comunicado-ii-da-direcao-e-da-presidencia>). References to his work occur throughout this book as it was influential on my thinking at an early stage of writing. Like all citations, they refer to the specific ideas cited, and are not in support of wider behaviours or positions. These allegations serve as a reminder beyond this specific case that even disciplines and epistemological frameworks ostensibly committed to justice are not immune from abuses of power.

<sup>121</sup> Weheliye (2005), 40–5; Weheliye traces this refutation ultimately to W.E.B. DuBois’ *The Souls of Black Folk*.

<sup>122</sup> de Sousa Santos (2018), 173.

The context of de Sousa Santos' *Deep Seeing* is not theatrical: he is setting out an epistemological model aimed at decolonising the gaze of the researcher looking at communities of the Global South (a mode that he calls, throughout the book, 'knowing-with'). But spectating – both inside and outside of the theatre – will prove to be a useful analogue to receiving (or looking to looking back, to use bell hooks' terms) throughout this book precisely because both have often wrongly sought or assumed a totalising vision of the viewed object. The paradigm of the implicated subject allows us to see how both the spectator and the receiver can be ethically responsible for the ableist ideas about disability that they inherit and co-create in the theatre. Making meaning out of the bodies of disabled characters requires the internalising and projection of a series of normative assumptions about bodies and ability, against which disabled bodies are measured for difference, which is then mythologised. It relies on the sustaining of a colonial notion of a normate body which has always been imaginary: all bodies are unique, a 'normal' body does not exist now any more than it ever did in the ancient world, but certain types of bodies have been privileged by legal, environmental and societal structures at various points throughout history. Disability comes to be narratively meaningful in the theatre through a process of spectating in which the spectator refuses to take responsibility for their implication in ableism. And in this sense a passive model of seeing is not dissimilar to a traditional model of passive reception in classical reception studies, which positions the receiver as powerless to refuse the inheritance of these tropes. Assemblage-thinking narrates this process otherwise, showing that meaning-making is an active process, and restoring an awareness of the ethical responsibility (or the implication) of the receiver, just as *Deep Seeing* (or the model of the implicated spectator) does for the viewer.

The rest of this book will proceed by showcasing in each chapter a particular way of reading blindness for meaning. In each case, I will unpick the notion that this meaning is passively inherited, or results from a classical tradition and examine instead how various subjects (and spectators) are implicated in this meaning-making. I have already acknowledged some of my own limitations in carrying out this work (limited proficiency in non-European languages, my own training predominantly in classics, and my lack of lived experience of blindness, for instance). But a further important limitation results from the way that this project is theoretically positioned as both a critique of linear models of classical

reception and an experiment with assemblage-thinking models.<sup>123</sup> A book wholly structured by assemblage-thinking would be able to fully embrace the provocations of crip time and commit to the politics of messy relation that Deleuze and Guattari (and many others, perhaps most recently Katherine McKittrick) have offered.<sup>124</sup> There would be no need for that book to be obedient to a timeline, to geography, to ideology or to other ways of mapping reality. A cursory glance at the contents page of this book will make it apparent that it remains tied to some notion of historicism, and to connections that are – sometimes – grounded in intertextuality as well as in shared time, space and social connection, or in other words, to the currency of a linear model of classical reception. A different book might have fully realised the provocation of speculative realism – and I feel the lure of writing that book strongly as I write this one – but to throw out the older model of reception entirely would be to depoliticise my thesis in this book. I wish that the notion of the classical tradition had *not* accompanied empire in its categorising of bodies (though not as much as I wish that empire had never existed to categorise bodies at all), and that the harm caused by these modes of making meaning out of disability had not therefore become so widespread and so normalised; but since they have, it will be necessary to critically address them before we can imagine otherwise.

This core limitation of my book is one that is well known in disciplines that have their basis in activism: what should the balance be in activism and activist scholarship between clearing the ground (drawing attention to and dismantling the harmful structures that operate in the world now) and dreaming a more just world for the future?<sup>125</sup> Visual activism, too, will need to grapple with this difficulty, and this is epitomised in the duality of hooks' expression in the quotation that began this chapter, where she describes the goal of what we have called in this chapter 'visual activism' as both 'to know the present' and 'to invent the future'. Visual activism consists in looking – and looking back – in ways that read 'against the grain' (to repeat Kuhn's terms) of the colonial categorisation of bodies that has become normalised and naturalised by a false commitment to objectivity. It has decolonial aspirations, then, in so far as it seeks to

<sup>123</sup> And in offering a critique of linear models of reception it draws on the concept of 'frail connections' in Greenwood (2009) and other important shifts away from a chain of receptions framework.

<sup>124</sup> See McKittrick (2021) on 'disobedient relationality'.

<sup>125</sup> I take the terms 'clearing' and 'dreaming' here from Sayyid (2014).

denaturalise the categorisation of bodies and meaning-making practices that were crucial to the violence of colonialism and provided the justification for its stealing of land and resources and dehumanising of colonised people. But visual activism is also chronopolitically positioned in an in-between time that is outside of linear time, where it refocuses the past in order to imagine a different future. Looking is tied to looking back in this book, then, but it is in the creation of this future that visual activism finds its real imperative.