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(Live!) The Post-traumatic Futurities of Black Debility

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Abstract

This article investigates the possibilities of artistic and performative strategies for elucidating forms of systemic violence targeted at racialized and disabled bodies. The analysis focuses on the album PTSD: Post traumatic stress disorder by the New York rapper Pharoahe Monch, delving into the ways in which it explores the intersections of Blackness and disability. The album's lyrics range from a critique of the structural racism in contemporary American society to subjective, embodied experiences of clinical depression, anxiety, and chronic asthma—and their complex entanglement. Informed by Jasbir Puar's formulation of 'debility' this article examines how Pharoahe Monch's album, as an expression and a performance of a singular life, helps to conceptualize the effects of the cultural and representational apparatuses that participate in marginalizing, devaluing, endangering, and annihiliating Black and disabled lives.

And they say I'm insane  
Because I see the remains of the whips and chains  
—Pharoahe Monch (2011, track 6)

Introduction

Recent studies expose problematic imbrications of psychiatric disability and race in the population-level mechanics of state-sanctioned violence in the United States. One study argues that police killings of unarmed Black citizens have a devastating impact on the mental health of the African American population in general (Bor, Venkataramani, Williams, & Tsai, 2018, p. 1). This impact is not limited to those who have witnessed such violence first-hand, but extends to those who have only been exposed to media coverage or other second-hand accounts of such killings (Bor et al., 2018, p. 1). Another study indicates that people with psychiatric diagnoses are significantly overrepresented in fatal police shootings (Saleh,
Appelbaum, Liu, Scott Stroup, & Wall, 2018). In 2015, the researchers found that while only 4.2 percent of the general US population carries a diagnosis of "serious mental illness," a startling twenty-three percent of those killed by police in the United States were seriously mentally ill (Saleh et al, 2018, p. 114). Furthermore, the study shows that being Black with a mental illness predicted the highest risk of getting killed by the police. This data demonstrates the urgency and magnitude of able-sanist and racist violence, demonstrating the need to explore how cultural perceptions of disability and madness contribute to state-sanctioned killing and injuring of racialized disabled people.

In this article, I explore how the rapper Pharoahe Monch articulates through the first-person singular the precarity of his two-fold subject position—a Black person with psychiatric disabilities—in a way that both responds to and resists intersectional violence. In the analysis, I address forms of this violence by utilizing Puar’s (2017) notion of “debilitation.” “Debilitation” refers to the systematic production of disability, the exposure of individuals from certain populations to the risk of disablement through limiting their access to adequate health care, housing, nutrition, and income.

Acknowledging the enormity of able-racist systemic violence, this article participates in the discussion on the forms of oppression based on disability and race that has been going on within the field of disability studies (e.g. Erevelles & Minear, 2010; Ritchie, 2017; Schalk, 2018) as well as within Mad studies (e.g. Aho, Ben-Moshe, & Hilton, 2017; Gorman, 2013). The objective of the article is to explore how art can help to foster deeper understanding on the subjective consequences of this intersectional violence which also reverberates with those who are not directly impacted by it.

In my analysis of Pharoahe Monch’s work, I respond to Schalk’s (2018) call for recognizing fiction as a valuable source of insight into urgent material questions related to disability. However, whereas the works analyzed by Schalk (2018) are those of speculative fiction, the art of Pharoahe Monch is both fictional and autobiographic at the same time, incorporating, for example, science fiction tropes and futuristic scenarios to accounts of personal life experiences. Through this merging of fictional and documentary approaches, Monch’s art functions as a form of what I call representational “egress," a way for disabled subjects to position themselves in relation to oppressive cultural apparatuses of representation and stereotyping (Koivisto, 2017; 2018). With egress, I aim to sketch out resistant forms of being in relation with oppressive cultural and representational infrastructures. Artists like Monch make use of, and not simply escape from, deeply-embedded cultural images—such as those that render the mad subject as inherently violent—that serve as sites, or instruments, of confinement (Eisenhauer, 2009; Price, 2011).

Egress is a strategy that recognizes representational infrastructures as too complex to be reduced to sharply-cut realms of the interior and the exterior. It is an attempt to perceive confinement into subject positions as equally restricting as confinement by structural barriers, and a way to understand how the material and economic forms of disenfranchisement are coupled up with forms representational confinement. Some possible responses to the functioning of this complex infrastructural arrangement can be found in rap music.

Rap and Disability

Rap music, historically an African American art form, has been recognized by some disability studies scholars as a site for theorizing disability. For example, Adelman
(2005) demonstrates how a rap song can be interpreted as a form of disability activism by offering a close reading of a song and music video by Ludacris. Porco (2014) explores the prevalent tradition in rap music of incorporating, and even simulating, speech impairments as an artistic strategy. Bailey (2011) discusses how what appear to be mere ableist tropes in hip hop could offer opportunities for subversive interpretations that function as a resistance against ableism. The approach offered by Bailey (2011) has influenced my own research, and also informs the analysis presented in this article.

I have previously studied the work of the activist and artist collective Krip Hop Nation (Koivisto, 2017), as well as horrorcore and post-horrorcore rappers, especially Bushwick Bill (Koivisto, 2017) and Tyler, the Creator (Koivisto, 2018) regarding their use of first-person narration of psychiatric disability. Bushwick Bill and Tyler, the Creator employ stereotypes of people with psychiatric disabilities as prone to violent and antisocial behavior, and one could argue that these types of representations contribute to the perpetuation of the stereotypes. My interpretation, however, suggests that these artists make use of the egress, by exploiting the stigmatizing imagery to deconstruct and harness its power, ultimately deflecting it against itself (Koivisto, 2017; 2018). In a sense both Bushwick Bill and Tyler, the Creator employ the cultural imagery of violence associated with madness and Blackness in a self-destructive manner, as if in an effort to exhaust the imagery through amplifying itself to and beyond its limits.

In contrast to my previous work, the artist discussed here is one who mainly rejects the modes of egress demonstrated by horrorcore and post-horrorcore rap. The approach offered by Pharoahe Monch does not employ the horror imagery of Blackness and madness, although he does not abandon the theme of violence altogether. As an egressor he does not resort to the monstrous stereotypes used by his colleagues drawing from the horrorcore tradition, but explicitly exposes his singular life in its vulnerability and fragility, and draws attention to the monstrosity of systemic racism and ableism instead. He egresses the image of the dangerous Black man, but, as an artist, lingers in the vicinity of the cultural substratum from which it emerges. This article explores how the representational interventions offered by Pharoahe Monch provide egresses by complicating the dichotomy of being in and being out of representational structures, especially subject positions and identities.

Several disability studies scholars, including Moya Bailey (2011), Theri A. Pickens (2017), and Sami Schalk (2018), have made important contributions to the discussion on race and disability. Bailey (2011) and Pickens (2017), as well as Terry Rowden (2009) have all made important observations regarding the connections between disability and Black culture and music. Schalk (2018) does not investigate music, but her work offers important insights for my analysis, as she demonstrates the theoretical potential of fictional representations of experiences of disability and disablement. Even though the tradition of disability autobiographies and forms of life writing have been central in disability studies and disability art, speculative fiction can, even when dealing with purely fictional disabilities, provide ways to conceptualize experiences of real, material experiences of disability and ableism (Schalk, 2018).

In the following sections, I provide a reading of Pharoahe Monch's work regarding the ways in which it relates to the objective of this article, which is to deepen understanding on the ways in which art can be employed for elucidating the subjective experiences of being exposed to the threat of systemic violence based on processes of racialization, psychiatrization, and disablement. The emphasis is
on his most recent albums, which are most extensively engaged in questions of disability in relation to race, and consequently delve into the themes of racism and ableism.

Pharoah Monch

Pharoah Monch (Troy Jamerson) has addressed questions of disability through autobiographical accounts on his recent albums, especially on *PTSD: Post Traumatic Stress Disorder* (2014), and to some extent on *W.A.R. (We Are Renegades)* (2011). These albums share a thematic consistency: a futuristic, science fiction-influenced framework through which contemporary societal problems are observed. Already on Pharoah Monch’s first two solo albums (1999, 2007), he exhibits a certain criticality towards the dominant culture and mainstream rap, and cherishes a faith in the capabilities of the art form for creating complex insights to social problems and inequities. Therefore, a certain future-oriented approach has been present throughout his career. An example of this kind of futuristic quality can be found already in a verse by eighteen-year-old Pharoah Monch: “From concentrations camps I escape with my sanity/In 2010 every man will be/Subject to global warming/Formless oval, millions of locusts swarming” (Organized Konfusion, 1991, track 4). This futuristic trait extends to the *W.A.R.* (2011) and *PTSD* (2014) albums, recorded two decades later. In the former, Pharoah Monch (2011) unfolds the story of how “in 2013, the World Government placed sanctions against free-thinking individuals in order to force people to adhere to one way of life” (track 11). *W.A.R.* is, then, a dystopian depiction of a global totalitarian regime.

In *W.A.R.* Pharoah Monch occasionally refers to himself as ‘13.’ The name obviously refers to a 2007 science fiction novel *Black Man* by the British author Richard Morgan. In the novel set a century after the present day “[t]he 13s are genetically engineered alpha males, designed to fight the century’s last conflicts” (“Black Man (aka Thirteen),” n.d.). Once the conflicts are over, the violent 13s are relocated in a Mars colony, as they turn out to be incapable of living in the now peaceful society due to their inherently aggressive character. However, one of them manages to return to Earth where he starts murdering its citizens. The main character, Carl Marsalis, a 13 himself—and Black—is assigned to eliminate the renegade 13. (“Black Man (aka Thirteen),” n.d.) The character 13 is more or less present throughout *W.A.R.* and *PTSD*, and even though the resemblance of Pharoah Monch’s 13 to Morgan’s character is rather vague, the mere reference calls upon questions of genetic manipulation, forced migration, eugenics, and slavery.

The exact nature of the war discussed in *W.A.R.* remains rather ambiguous throughout the album, but it evokes multiple connotations. In addition to the several wars—in the conventional sense of the word—that the United States has engaged in during the twentieth and twentieth-first centuries, the metaphor of war has been employed in political rhetoric for referring to its domestic policies unrelated to military operations per se (Agamben, 2003/2005, Chapter 1.7). Notable examples include War on Poverty, War on Crime, War on Drugs, and War on Gangs. Pharoah Monch’s *W.A.R.* does not focus on any particular war, but manages to invoke the several ways these wars have been entangled with Black lives and deaths. Furthermore, his use of the concept of war resonates with Sontag's (1978) analysis of the metaphorical use of war for referring to illness; she explicates how the medical discourse of the nineteenth century viewed illnesses as “invad[ing]” and “infiltrat[ing]” (p. 66) enemies that needed to be defeated by medicine. In the
twentieth century, on the other hand, this objective was taken up by the whole society. The political rhetoric has preserved this practice of framing diseases as enemies to be defeated on the level of population, a mindset which Sontag (1989) considers characteristic to capitalism.

In addition to this tradition of using war as a metaphor in rhetoric on extramilitary political endeavors, W.A.R. refers to the fictional futuristic event unfolding through the course of the album, in which the World Government ruthlessly suppresses any attempt by its citizens to question the status quo. Styled as an acronym, W.A.R. is also a defiant assertion, “We Are Renegades,” again referring to the novel Thirteen in which a renegade 13 attacks the society that had first created him, and eventually discarded him as useless.

The way Pharoahe Monch deploys the concept of “war” resonates with the contemporary forms of debilitation, and the systematic exposure of Black Americans to state-sanctioned violence. The multitude of meanings offered by his approach become available precisely because his war is a fictional one. This strategy supports Schalk’s (2018) observation that speculative fiction can be used for discussing relevant issues in contemporary society.

The theme of disability is present already in W.A.R. (2011), but Pharoahe Monch discusses it more extensively throughout PTSD (2014), starting with the album’s name. The album begins with a short intro track which consists in a passage spoken by a synthetic human voice, the artificiality of which is further underlined by occasional mechanical disturbances in the enunciation:

Hello. Welcome to Recollection. If you are experiencing anxiety, depression, panic attacks, insomnia, or excessive stress—well, we here at Recollection can help you. Over the years we've developed a unique technology that allows us to extract traumatic experiences from your memory, restoring healthy life. Our treatments are painless and non-invasive. (Pharoahe Monch, 2014, track 1)

In spite of its brevity, the intro efficiently and explicitly positions the album in the thematic framework of disability (“anxiety, depression, panic attacks, insomnia”) and that of treatment and rehabilitation (“our treatments are painless and non-invasive”). The questions of disability are also taken up in the next track, first song of the PTSD, “Time2.” The song establishes a connection between economic precarity, criminal behavior, and psychiatric disability, but refuses to arrange them in a neat narrative form with intelligible causalities. Pharoahe Monch—or the character he is portraying—explicates how he struggles to maintain a job:

I'm trying to utilize my time to shine here
I understand we only have limited time here
Dudes on my line trying to sell me a timeshare
That'll be me with a nine losing my mind in Time Square
Like, "Is this how you wanna treat me? You know what this business was before you hired me? A piece of shit! Everybody on the floor right now!"
[A sound of a weapon being loaded]
"Everybody get the fuck down!" (Pharoahe Monch, 2014, track 2)

After a chorus, which seems like a prayer—“Lord, lord, lord… Help me cleanse my sins/Help me lift this spell”—the narrator continues, now in a discontinuous, stuttering manner:
La-la-la-last ye-ye-year they hired me
And this-s-s-s we-we-we-we-week the-the-they fired me
And I g-g-got all these b-b-b-bills to pay
And what the f-f-f-f-fuck am I supposed to say
T-t-t-to my wife, she's p-p-p-pregnant
And if the kid does not go to college his life's irrelevant (Pharoahe Monch, 2014, track 2)

Stutter has often been used in rap music as a deliberate artistic device (McKay, 2013, p. 81). It signifies simultaneously a disruption of discourse, and an intensification of the rhythmicity of the vocal delivery. Pharoahe Monch uses stutter here to convey anxiety and insecurity, which creates a contrast between the conduct he describes in the previous verse. Towards the end of the first verse, he conjures the image of a gun-wielding angry Black man—a staple character in gangsta rap—but in the second verse he egresses this identity in order to assume that of a responsible, loving father, who is terrified that his unemployment will result in his unborn child's life becoming "irrelevant."

In the following lines, Pharoahe Monch accounts for the lack of possibilities for coping economically without a job, and being Black man, he is always in danger of becoming perceived as a criminal—which ultimately increases the risk of being exposed to violence. As Schalk (2018) reminds us, "[n]umerous incidents of police violence have been justified through claims of police officers fearing for their own lives, even when the person who was injured or murdered was handcuffed, restrained, outnumbered, and/or significantly smaller than the police officer(s) involved" (Introduction, Section 3, para. 21). If one is going to be treated as a criminal anyway, why not just seek job opportunities in the drug trade?

And my-my-my melanin-n-n-n makes me a felon
And-nd I just wanna take this fuckin' c-c-crack and sell it
To the planet (Pharoahe Monch, 2014, track 2)

This contemplation on the precarious future of his family and himself is followed by a self-diagnosis, including reference to the anxiolytic Xanax, which, like all benzodiazepines, is widely misused and highly addictive drug that easily becomes counterproductive in therapeutic use, especially if the use is prolonged. Through referring to both Xanax and crack cocaine within a window of seconds, Pharoahe Monch, in a sense, juxtaposes the two, calling attention to the arbitrariness with which some psychoactive substances become determined as medicines and others as narcotics—a distinction which plays a role in the mass-incarceration of Black men.

Panic, I'm a manic-depressive mechanic that manages to frantically do damage
To his brain with Xanax (Pharoahe Monch, 2014, track 2)

Shortly afterwards, Pharoahe Monch mentions another brand of medicine that is used in the treatment of depression, anxiety, and obsessive-compulsive disorder:

Is this illusion optic?
Perhaps it's just a chemical reaction with my Zoloft and acidophilus
(Pharoahe Monch, 2014, track 2)

Zoloft is a brand name for sertraline, a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor, and acidophilus is a bacteria that occurs naturally in human gastrointestinal tract. With this "chemical reaction" Pharoahe Monch refers to the so-called gut-brain axis, the
interaction between the gut flora and the brain, the role of which has been lately recognized as a potentially significant factor in the development of depression (Huang, Wang, & Hu, 2016). This simple line effectively destabilizes, or egresses, the perception of psychiatric disabilities as consequences of social and psychological factors, which has been the dominant perspective in the song's lyrics up to this moment.

The closing lines of the last verse of “Time2” allude to anxiety attack as well as to asthma, a condition which Pharoahe Monch has had since early childhood. As will be discussed later, interviews with the artist reveal that his asthma is tightly interwoven with his experiences of psychiatric disabilities. In the final lines of the song his vocal delivery conflates with syntax; he speeds up his rapping as if actually running out of oxygen in a simulation of an asthma attack: “My tolerance is volatile and it feels like I’m losing oxygen!” (Pharoahe Monch, 2014, track 2).

The next song, “Losing My Mind,” continues the discussion on psychiatric disability and self-destructive behavior. In a recurring line Pharoahe Monch (2014) laconically states “I spin/The cylinder on my revolver/I spin, the cylinder” (track 3). The inaccessibility of healthcare for anyone living in economic precarity is highlighted in the following lines: “No Medicaid, no medication/Thinking you’re better off dead/Instead should have been dedicated to education” (track 3). The more specific issue of Black people’s limited access to mental health care is explicitly addressed in the passage “my family customs were not accustomed to dealing with mental health/It was more or less an issue for white families with wealth” (track 3). The disparity Pharoahe Monch observes between his family and the “white families with wealth” regarding access to psychiatric care exemplifies an effect of debilitation, the systematic exclusion of certain groups of people from healthcare services (Puar, 2017).

In addition to frequent references to different disabilities and diseases, Pharoahe Monch mentions several pharmaceutical drugs throughout PTSD (2014). These include Zoloft and Xanax (track 2), Maalox and Mylanta (track 12), Prozac (track 3), Vicodin (track 13), Epinephrine and Albuterol (track 11), and Ortho Tri-Cyclen (track 11). Furthermore, one track on PTSD is fashioned as an advertisement for a fictional asthma medication Zerithromycin Pluralis (track 10). This meticulous naming of medication reflects the biopolitical thematics of the album, and corresponds to what Puar (2017) calls “capacity,” a concept which complicates the disability/ability binary and offers more nuanced ways of thinking ability in neoliberalism. Individuals, even the ones who have succeeded at meeting the prevailing requirements of productivity, are not simply able as opposed to disabled, but always not as capable as possible. No matter how healthy one is, there is always space for improvement. One is never fully capable, but merely possessing a certain level of capacity which is subject to perishing, depending on how hard the individual is willing to work to maintain or, preferably, enhance it. (Puar, 2017, p. 82.)

The obligation faced by individuals to make investments in their health in order to stay competitive in the labor market is illustrated by the care with which the different medications are listed, usually referred to by their trade names, as if to emphasize their status as consumer goods. This medical and consumerist tendency and urge to enhance one’s life pharmaceutically, characteristic to the biopolitical neoliberalism, is contrasted by Pharoahe Monch's meticulous suicidal fantasies and death wishes scattered throughout the album.
Suicide is present in the lyrics throughout the album, for example in “Losing My Mind” (Pharoahe Monch, 2014, track 3) as well as in the album cover, which features an image of a person wearing a gas mask and holding some kind of futuristic handgun to his head. A song located near the end of the album, “Post Traumatic Stress Disorder,” depicts Pharoahe Monch in an effort to commit suicide, which gets interrupted by a mysterious voice:

> Seen death twice, it's ugly motherfucker, man
> But you conversate with him when you suffering
> He said: “Let go of the pain, you'll never rock the mic again
> Your choice—slug to the brain or 20 Vicodin"
> I kinda likened it to Ortho Tri-Cyclen
> Disturbing the natural cycles of life and it's trifling
> Fuck what you heard, less money more problems
> Four years removed from the game with no album
> I put the gun to my brain, but first I wrote a note to explain
> Put the Luger in my head, and these are the words that I said
> “Sure as kingdoms rise the same kingdoms will surely fall"
> “And wash away like memories, as if they weren't there at all”
> “Like broken limbs of trees that's lost its leaves to winter's wind"
> “Spring will come again"
> “Live!"
> “Live!"
> “Live!"
> “Live!"
> (Pharoahe Monch, 2014, track 13)

In the beginning of the verse, Pharoahe Monch recounts “conversating” with death as something you do when you are suffering. Death then assures him that his career as a rapper is over and that the only choice left is that between a pistol and a drug overdose. Pharoahe Monch obviously chooses the former and writes suicide letter, but stops the attempt upon hearing the words of consolation unexpectedly coming from his own lips. The second verse recounts the preparation for yet another suicide attempt:

> Tomorrow is never
> Hope is abolished
> Mind and soul have little to no unity
> Life threw a brick through my window of opportunity
> My immune system lacked diplomatic immunity
> When asthma attacks the Black community
> Where do you go from there?
> Long walk, short pier
> Thought I knew all it was just to know of the ledge
> Till I glanced down at all ten toes on the ledge
> Before I heard what sounded to me like a pledge
> Emerged from the darkness, and this is what it said
> “Do not despair, breathe, fight”
> “For there is more life to live, believe”
> “More insight to share, retrieve”
> “Must dare to be illustrious”
> “Exhale, hold, inhale, receive and”
“Live!”
“Live!”
“Live!”
“Live!”

(Pharoahe Monch, 2014, track 13)

Again, the voice appears, but this time it emerges “from the darkness” instead of coming out of Pharoahe Monch’s own lips. It once again solaces him, repeatedly urging him to “live.” One could perceive the song as an overcoming narrative; the protagonist beats depression and chooses to live. However, there is another kind of reading available. The different voices heard throughout the song function as an illustration of the dynamics of biopolitics. The first two voices heard in the first verse of the song are easily identifiable as belonging to Pharoahe Monch and to a personification of death, respectively, but the identity of the third one is not disclosed, and is only referred to as “voice.” First it unexpectedly comes out of Pharoahe Monch himself, but abruptly and unexpectedly, as if distinct from his subject, and in the second instance it does not emanate from any corporeal entity whatsoever, only “emerg[ing] from the darkness.” The voice asserts that Pharoahe Monch must “live” and that he “must dare to be illustrious” (Pharoahe Monch, 2014, track 13). It is, in a way, an antithesis of the suicidal persuasions put forward by death in the first verse; one could make an interpretation that it is the voice of life as opposed to the voice of death. However, I would like to suggest that instead of signifying a vitalistic or animistic incarnation of life as a benevolent cosmic energy, the voice is, in fact, an embodiment of the great ethos of neoliberal biopolitics: One has to stop feeling sorry for oneself and make one’s life an enterprise.

To make oneself, or one’s life, an enterprise for oneself is what Foucault (2004/2008) recognizes as the requirement for all citizens in neoliberal societies (p. 225). Foucault (2004/2008) states that establishing “the enterprise [as] the universally generalized social model” was executed by “the reconstruction of a set of what could be called ‘warm’ moral and cultural values which are presented precisely as antithetical to the ‘cold’ mechanism of competition” (p. 242). Pharoahe Monch’s constant references to suicide should be understood against this framework. An additional angle to this interpretation is offered by the notion of “slow death.” Puar uses the concept of “slow death” by Lauren Berlant (2007) to elucidate the profitability of disability and illness as individuals are burdened by the expenses of their medical care, and even though not engaging in production and consumption as active citizens, they still have a function in the economy as long as they, biologically, live. Furthermore, Puar notes that when considered in the context of slow death, suicide starts to signify not merely a termination of life, but an escape from slow death, a death that is already irreversibly taking place (Puar, 2017, p. 11). The voice talking Pharoahe Monch out of committing suicide is not, then, doing it out of care or compassion, but merely because death would remove him, his body, from the economic circulation.

The stance Pharoahe Monch assumes in the song is egressive in its deliberate ambiguity, as it does not offer a definite closure for the narrative. It does not clearly indicate whether he ends up committing suicide, or whether he obeys the “voice” instead, and keeps living—whatever it means in biopolitical neoliberalism. The song merely ends with the “voice” repeating its imperative, “live!,” to which Pharoahe Monch ultimately refuses to respond in any way.

The encounter between Pharoahe Monch, death, and the entity which could be identified either as embodying life or neoliberalism, is paired up with an insight
addressing a larger social framework when he states that "asthma attacks the Black community" (Pharoahe Monch, 2014, track 13). This obviously alludes to the well-documented disproportionality of the occurrence of asthma between African American and white populations (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017). In 2016 the asthma mortality in the African American population was two times higher in comparison with white Americans (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018). This reflects the wider socio-economic disparities between the populations, since professional healthcare continues to be less accessible to Black people (Chen, Vargas-Bustaman, Mortensen, & Ortega, 2016; Copeland, 2007). Furthermore, Black people are generally more extensively exposed to environmental factors, such as poor housing conditions, which have a role in the development of asthma (Pacheco et al., 2014). Even though Pharoahe Monch (2014) recounts his personal experience of asthma, he also underlines the structural, debilitating, nature of the illness: asthma does not operate simply through attacks within singular bodies, but it "attacks the Black community" (track 13).

Puar (2017) explores race, ethnicity, nationality, and disability, and their connections with different forms of systemic violence. She interrogates the notion of disability, its emphasis on the European and North American disability rights movements and identity politics, and introduces the concepts ‘debility’ and ‘capacity’ for problematizing the rather binary formulation of different forms of embodiment. Regarding the distinction between disability and debility, Puar (2017) notes that the latter "foregrounds the slow wearing down of populations instead of the event of becoming disabled" (Preface, para. 8). Debility also emphasises the corporeal nature of disability; the way disability is embodied and negotiated in social and cultural settings outside the sphere of liberal disability politics of the developed societies (Puar, 2017). Debility points to the biopolitical function of disability, the incapacitation of particular populations, and to their gradual process of becoming disabled through disproportionately distributed access to nutrition, medical infrastructure, and healthcare between the Global North and the Global South, as well as within individual societies and regimes. The image of asthma attacking the Black community poignantly reflects Puar’s (2017) description of debilitation.

As an individual victim of the population-level asthma attack, Pharoahe Monch experienced two near-death experiences as a child. These close encounters with death due to severe asthma attacks recur over and over again in his lyrics: "seen death twice" (Pharoahe Monch, 2014, track 13); "a lung disease ... almost took my life twice (Pharoahe Monch, 2011, track 13). Pharoahe Monch rejoices in surviving his asthma, but also acknowledges his survival from another danger he has been exposed to as a Black man: "Doubled my expectancy, can you believe it?/Look, no bullet wounds, not paraplegic" (Pharoahe Monch, 2011, track 13). Here Pharoahe Monch refers to the probability of death or injury induced by gun violence faced by African American men: 22 percent of spinal cord injury patients are Black, and violence is the third leading cause of such disabilities (National Spinal Cord Injury Statistical Center, 2016).

Whereas asthma has been present in Pharoahe Monch's life since early childhood, it appears that his experience of depression and anxiety are much more recent and, rather ironically, directly influenced by the medication that had been prescribed for his asthma. In a 2014 interview Pharoahe Monch explicates how the album PTSD was informed by his experience of depression (djvlad, 2014). He accounts how he had been unable to identify the experience as a mental health
condition, and how he came to understand it only after his dentist happened to notice that the combination of medication he had been taking for his chronic asthma was likely to induce symptoms similar to those of anxiety and mood disorders (djvlad, 2014). It is possible, then, that his psychiatric disability would not have occurred had he not been consuming the particular combination of asthma medication. Therefore, Pharoahe Monch experienced artificially produced mood and anxiety disorders which remained unrecognized by the same institutions and healthcare professionals that provided treatment for his asthma.

The accounts of illnesses, disabilities, and treatment scattered throughout Pharoahe Monch’s albums combine to create an image of the network connecting biopolitical apparatuses and singular bodies. The laconic statement “no Medicaid, no medication” illustrates succinctly the population-level inaccessibility to healthcare, which is another function of debilitation. On the eponymous track on W.A.R. Pharoahe Monch uses three lines to poignantly illustrate mass incarceration and the consequences of the privatization of prisons: “They wanna turn the globe into a prison/And being sick is better than being dead/Cause when you’re sick and in bed, you’re indebted to meds” (Pharoahe Monch, 2011, track 4). This passage also aligns with the notion of slow death by depicting the ways individuals who otherwise would not be productive members of the society can contribute to the economy, since “personal debt incurred through medical expenses is the number one reason for filing for bankruptcy” (Puar, 2017, p. 1). When Pharoahe Monch (2011) talks about the “system not designed for you to achieve” (track 13), he effectively talks about the same phenomenon Ervelles and Minear address when they explicate how

individuals located perilously at the interstices of race, class, gender, and disability are constituted as non-citizens and (no) bodies by the very social institutions (legal, educational, and rehabilitational) that are designed to protect, nurture, and empower them. (Ervelles & Minear, 2010, pp. 128-129)

Conclusion

In the beginning of the PTSD, the Recollection Facility is introduced as an institution which is supposed to treat and rehabilitate, to restore a “healthy life” (Pharoahe Monch, 2014, track 1). The objective of the facility, however, is dramatically, yet inexplicably, altered in the course of the album. The voice from the Recollection Facility can be heard for the last time towards the end of the album:

I'm sorry Pharoahe Monch, 13 Alpha, 13, Renegade 13, or whatever you would like to be referred to as of this moment, but during your hibernation period here at Recollection, ten years have passed. It is now the year 2024, and by government law 001666, we are sentencing you to life imprisonment for the violation of the World Freethinking Agreement. (Pharoahe Monch, 2014, track 15)

In its final appearance on the album the voice of the Recollection Facility announces that during Pharoahe Monch’s rehabilitation, or “hibernation period,” governmental and legislative changes have resulted in him becoming a criminal through violating “the World Freethinking Agreement” (Pharoahe Monch, 2014, track 15). This plot twist efficiently addresses the issues that Foucault (1999/2003; 2003/2006) observed in his analysis of the formation of psychiatric and disciplinary institutions: the ideological and organizational kinship between psychiatric
institutions and correctional facilities, the asylum and the prison, and the processes through which pathological behavior fluidly transforms into criminal, and vice versa.

The final announcement by the Recollection Facility comes back to the question of confinement. Pharoahe Monch's art provides instances of egress from the confining, invasive, and consuming infrastructure of representation through distributing fragmentary views on representations of disability, debility, race, and institutions of care. Often, these glances are contradictory, drawing attention to the incompatibility of different conceptions regarding such complex phenomena. For example, he makes an observation that madness emerges from the psychological pressure imposed on singular bodies by social structures, only to destabilize it by noting that perhaps it is, after all, the result of arbitrary, unpredicted organic processes based on the interaction of an individual's gut flora and an antidepressant. He goes through the images and ideas in a pace that renders it impossible to linger on any given perspective, to arrive at a conclusion.

Pickens (2017) states that "histories of disability and blackness caution us against the stable narrativizing of ideas and people …, warning that we elide the important details, nuances, and complexities at our own peril" (p. 96). I argue that through the amalgamation of fiction and autobiography, Pharoahe Monch's art offers egresses from essentializing conceptions regarding disability and Black identities. Its combination of fictional and autobiographical expression, coupled with an analysis regarding the relationship between the subject and the apparatuses of care and control to which it is connected insofar as it is lives, exemplifies the potential of art at preserving nuances and complexities of the lived experience. Pharoahe Monch evinces that art informed by disability experience can open up unique ways for theorizing disability, even—or, perhaps, especially—when the narrative is overtly fictional. As stated earlier, the analysis put forth in this article aims to address Schalk's (2018) important proposal for disability studies to explore fiction for theorizing and conceptualizing in the most nuanced way possible the material realities of disability and the mechanisms of debilitation characteristic to the neoliberal society. Acknowledging that the autobiographical can be considered as not mutually exclusive with the fictional, I have utilized rap music, and Pharoahe Monch in particular, in an exploration on the potential of art for fostering complex understandings about disabled, psychiatrized, and racialized subjectivities and processes of subjectification.

Pharoahe Monch's work resists the urge to know in any exhaustive way what disability is, what madness is, what does being Black and disabled mean—and he fires these different ideas and insights at the listener until he loses breath. Instead of merely providing an explanatory description of the social conditions under discussion, his work points to the connections, and disconnections, of relations of forces that induce death and suffering and life and hope; his work illustrates an oscillation between vantages of his body that almost died due to asthma and suicide, and the Black community, the African American people who have been, and continue to be, debilitated by policies embedded in a cultural legacy of racism and ableism.

References


**Endnotes**

1. The death rate per million for the demographic categories of Blacks with mental illness, non-Hispanic whites with mental illness, and Hispanics with mental illness were 25.62, 19.60, and 17.90, respectively; and for the same demographic groups with no mental illness, respectively, 6.19, 1.99, and 3.05 (Saleh et al., 2018, p. 112).

2. Before his solo career, between 1991 and 1997, Pharoahe Monch had already published three albums with Organized Konfusion, a critically acclaimed underground duo consisting of himself and a fellow-rapper Prince Poetry (Lawrence Baskerville). In spite of their critical stance toward social injustice as well as of what they perceived as the decadence of the mainstream hip hop, Organized Konfusion albums lacked references to disability beyond the occasional use of words 'ill' and 'illness' as a reference to the exceptional skill and artistry the rappers claimed to display in their music and songwriting, which is a rather common rhetorical device in rap (Koivisto, 2017). Pharoahe Monch’s first two solo albums, *Internal Affairs* from 1999 and *Desire* from 2007, are very similar in that regard: They do not address disability beyond such passages as the one where he claims to have "rhymes sicker than Lyme disease and gangrene" (Pharoahe Monch, 1999,
3. The novel was published in the United States under the name *Thirteen*.

4. A reference to the song "Know the Ledge" by Eric B. and Rakim (1991). A wordplay of the word “knowledge,” the phrase signifies the narrator's—ultimately futile—attempt to survive his life as an inner-city drug dealer: “Living life too close to the edge/Hoping that I know the ledge” (track 2).