Università degli Studi di Padova

Dipartimento di Studi Linguistici e Letterari

Corso di Laurea Magistrale in
Lingue e Letterature Europee e Americane
Classe LM-37

Tesi di Laurea

Paralympic Games and Writing the Self: "Somebody" or "Some Body" Memoirs?

Relatrice
Prof.sa Marilena Parlati

Correlatrice
Prof.sa Fiona Clare Dalziel

Laureanda
Anna Decandia
n° matr. 2091636 / LMLLA

Anno Accademico 2024 / 2025

Abstract

A true understanding of disability requires critical examination of its counterpart, the notion of the "norm". Emerged between the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, this last concept delineated a set of physical and cognitive traits considered typical of human bodies. Consequently, individuals deviating from this presumed standard, most notably disabled people, were increasingly viewed negatively and subjected to systemic social exclusion, an attitude also reflected in disability representations within literary fiction. Nevertheless, in the last three decades, following the civil rights movement, an expanding number of people with disabilities are engaging in self-life narrative practices to reclaim control over their stories and to challenge societal assumptions. This thesis investigates three self-life writings authored by Paralympic athletes: Tanni Grey-Thompson's *Seize the Day* (2001), Anne Wafula Strike's *In My Dreams I Dance* (2024), and Oscar Pistorius's *Blade Runner* (2012). It explores how these athletes actively negotiate their embodiment, particularly in response to contextual expectations, and the significance of sport in their lives. At the same time, it discusses how the attempt to offset perceived physical flaws can result in overcompensation and the manifestation of toxic masculinity, a dynamic exemplified by the case of Oscar Pistorius. Furthermore, employing an intersectional approach, this thesis examines how womanhood and, in one of the two instances, Africanness contributed to shaping the identities of Tanni Grey-Thompson and Anne Wafula Strike as individuals with disability and accomplished sportswomen.

Abstract in Italian

Una piena comprensione del concetto di disabilità richiede di esaminare in modo critico la sua controparte, quello di "normalità". Emerso tra il diciottesimo e il diciannovesimo secolo, quest'ultimo delineò un insieme di tratti fisici e cognitivi considerati tipici dei corpi umani. Di conseguenza, gli individui che deviavano da questo presunto standard, primi tra tutti le persone con disabilità, furono visti sempre più negativamente e soggetti a una sistematica esclusione sociale, un atteggiamento riflesso anche nelle rappresentazioni letterarie della disabilità. Tuttavia, negli ultimi tre decenni, a seguito del movimento per i diritti civili, un numero sempre maggiore di persone disabili ha intrapreso percorsi di narrazione autobiografica per riprendersi il controllo delle proprie storie e per scardinare i pregiudizi sociali. Questa tesi analizza tre autobiografie di atleti paralimpici: *Seize the Day* (2001) di Tanni Grey-Thompson, *In My Dreams I Dance* (2024) di Anne Wafula Strike e *Blade Runner* (2012) di Oscar Pistorius. Esplora come questi atleti a tutti gli effetti "negozino" la propria corporeità, in particolare in reazione alle aspettative dell'ambiente circostante, e il ruolo dello sport nelle loro vite. Allo stesso tempo, indaga come il tentativo di sopperire a ciò che viene percepito come un difetto fisico possa portare a una sovracompensazione e alla manifestazione di mascolinità tossica, una dinamica esemplificata dal caso di Oscar Pistorius. Inoltre, utilizzando un approccio intersezionale, questa tesi esamina come l'essere donna e, in uno dei due esempi, africana abbiano contribuito a plasmare le identità di Tanni Grey-Thompson e Anne Wafula Strike come persone con disabilità e atlete affermate.

Table of Contents

Introduction 1

1. Approaching Disability 7

1.1. From the "Norm" to the Medical Model 7

1.1.1. Where to Begin: The Concept of "Normalcy" 7

1.1.2. From the Medical Model to the First Socio-Contextual Approaches 11

1.2. From the Social Model to the End of Identity Politics 16

1.2.1. The Social Model and Its Critique 16

1.2.2. New Proposals: The Interactional and the Cultural Approaches 22

1.2.3. The End of Identities and Dismodernism 27

2. Disability, Literature, and the Academia 33

2.1. Studying Disability 33

2.1.1. The Academic Field of Disability Studies 33

2.1.2. Exploring Intersectionality 36

2.2. Literary Disability Studies 41

2.2.1. Representing Disability in Literature 41

2.2.2. Narrative Prosthesis and the Body as a Metaphor 45

2.2.3. Aesthetic Nervousness: Tension on Different Levels 49

3. Disability and Life-Writing: Exploring the Interplay of Self and Impairment 55

3.1. Beyond Autobiography: The Intricate Genre of Self-Life Writing 55

3.1.1. Mapping the Diverse Forms of Self-Life Writing 55

3.1.2. Reading Life Writing: The Complex Issue of Truth 59

3.2. The Disability Memoir: Unfolding Different Embodiments 64

3.2.1. The Importance of Disabled Life-Writing 64

3.2.2. Self-Representing (Physical) Disability: Reinforcing and Subverting Narrative Patterns 67

4. The Paralympic Movement 75

4.1. History of the Paralympic Games 75

4.2. Gender Disparities and/at the Paralympics 83

4.3. The Issue of Prostheses and the Cyborg Athlete 90

5. Contested Selves: Disability's Intersection with Gender and Race in Paralympic Athletes' Self-Life Narratives 99

5.1. Fixing the Body? 99

5.2. Negotiating Womanhood and Africanness 110

5.3. Overcompensation and Toxic Masculinity 120

References 133

Riassunto 139

Introduction

The lived experience of people with disabilities is characterized by the constant negotiation between two dimensions. The first is personal, encompassing their identities and the inherent realities of their impairment, with the body serving a central role, as it directly shapes and manifests its implications. The second arises, instead, from society's pervasive imposition of the "norm", which establishes a standard to which all individuals are expected to conform. Regarded as not adhering to it, people with disabilities face systemic exclusion, which translates into both environmental barriers that impede their participation in public life and more profound forms of ableism and discrimination, including the notion that they and their bodies should be "fixed". Consequently, individuals with disabilities, particularly those who have not internalized oppression, find themselves continually fighting for their entitlements to be recognized and enforced, while simultaneously asserting their right to be exactly as they are, in their given embodiment.

While watching the 2024 Paris Paralympic Games, I began to wonder how this negotiation is handled by disabled athletes. Indeed, their situation is particularly unique, presenting a compelling interplay. On the one hand, their sporting successes often culminate in visibility and notoriety, which in turn affords them a privileged position and a reduced vulnerability to certain forms of marginalization. On the other hand, their athletic careers place them in a context where the ideals associated with the body are even more demanding and conceptualized as being in opposition to the characteristics of the body with a disability. Therefore, I decided to investigate how this tension influences the identity formation of Paralympic athletes as both individuals and elite competitors, and I thought that analyzing their autobiographies would prove to be the most effective approach, as they provide access to their experiences from their own perspective.

The specific memoirs were chosen according to several considerations to ensure a multifaceted approach. My first criterion was to identify British Paralympians who had engaged in what Watson and Smith (2001) refer to as self-life writing or (self-)life narrative, expressions that the two scholars believe comprehensively encompass the heterogeneous variety of (self-)referential practices. From the available texts, Grey-Thompson's *Seize the Day* (2001) and Wafula Strike's *In My Dreams I Dance* (2024) were chosen due to the similar profiles of their authors: both are women, have similar

conditions, and competed in the same discipline – wheelchair racing. I believed that these commonalities would represent a solid framework for an effective comparison, allowing me to begin also identifying recurring patterns. At the same time, however, Wafula Strike's origin from Kenya (she acquired British citizenship in 2006) introduced an additional, intriguing layer to the discussion. Having selected two memoirs by women, I deemed it crucial to also incorporate a male perspective to more broadly explore issues of gender. I opted for *Blade Runner* (2012) because Oscar Pistorius is the most emblematic example of toxic masculinity within parasport. Aware that this reached its peak in 2013, when he killed his girlfriend, Reeva Steenkamp, I wanted to explore whether his autobiography – a term that Watson and Smith only allow to indicate retrospective (self-)life writing as understood in Western tradition – displayed instances of this trait and if its origins could be identified. Moreover, his self-life narrative allowed me to introduce a further dimension to the discussion: the intersection between disability, technology, and sport. Crucially, his relationship with his prostheses and his transformation into a cyborg athlete also led me to question whether these aspects correlated with the development of his toxic masculinity. The fact that he also competed in athletics, thereby aligning with Grey-Thompson and Wafula Strike's discipline, was coincidental but proved to be an interesting, unifying element across all three selected texts.

To lay the necessary groundwork for the analysis of these autobiographies, this thesis begins by addressing the conceptual framework of disability, subsequently narrowing its focus through successive layers. Specifically, the first chapter is divided into five sections. Drawing upon Lennard Davis's *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (1995), Section One explores how the development of the concept of disability is strictly connected to that of the "norm". Section Two presents the first theoretical approaches to disability, primarily concentrating on the individual/"medical" model and the early socio-contextual frameworks. Section Three delves into the social model, focusing on its principles and its positive outcomes, but also acknowledging its limitations, which have fueled criticism in the last few years. Section Four discusses two recent approaches formulated to replace the previous frameworks: the "intersectional" model, elaborated by Tom Shakespeare in *Disability Rights and Wrongs* (2006) – the main source for this and the two preceding sections – and the "cultural" model, proposed by

Anne Waldschmidt (2017). Section Five returns to Davis – this time to his work *Bending Over Backwards* (2002) – and explores his argument that it is no longer necessary to elaborate new approaches to disability, but it is the category of disability in itself that needs to be questioned, a move that would challenge identity politics in general and initiate the transition from Postmodernism to Dismodernism.

Chapter Two also comprises five sections. The first traces the evolution of disability studies as an academic field, highlighting its origins in the civil rights movement and its turn towards the humanities in the 1990s. The second section defines intersectionality and analyzes how the interaction between disability studies and feminism, queer theory, and postcolonial studies, although sometimes having been counterproductive in the past, can offer new insights in all the disciplines involved. The third section further narrows the focus, exploring the interplay between disability and literature. Particularly, it explains why disability appears so frequently in literary texts and why these are an especially useful tool to investigate it. The fourth section centers on the "Narrative Prosthesis" theory, formulated by Mitchell and Snyder in 2000. This seeks to explain why disability has historically been used in literature as a metaphorical device for what resists society's efforts to "enforce normalcy", pointing out also the body's role in grounding it in materiality. The last section discusses the different authors Ato Quayson took inspiration from to elaborate his "Aesthetic Nervousness" theory in 2007, which is based on the idea that, when disability is depicted, it challenges the traditional ways in which stories and characters are narrated, causing tension on several levels.

Divided into four sections, the third chapter discusses disability self-life writing. Section One is an overview of the genre, focusing on its historical development and providing definitions of the existing sub-types. It also introduces Couser's (2009) distinction between "somebody" and "some body" memoirs, a key issue of this dissertation, given that, aligning with the tension described above, autobiographies by Paralympic athletes occupy a unique position, encompassing both categories. Section Two examines the characteristics of self-life narratives, the issue of truthfulness, the compositional challenges faced by disabled authors, and how these might be overcome. The last two sections exclusively revolve around disability; the third explores the most crucial stages in disabled people's engagement with self-life writing practices, and why these are important for them, while the fourth, drawing upon Couser's book *Signifying*

Bodies (2009), investigates typical prejudicial narrative patterns, together with more recent counterhegemonic rhetorics that can be found in "new disability memoirs".

Chapter Four focuses on the Paralympic Movement and consists of three sections. The first outlines its history, beginning by concentrating on the figure of Dr. Ludwig Guttmann – its founding father – and the Stoke Mandeville Games, then proceeding to explain how these became the Paralympics. Moreover, it delves into the steps that led to the formation of the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) and also into its relationship with the International Olympic Committee (IOC), underscoring both its positive and negative sides. The second section examines the issue of the underrepresentation of women in all aspects of parasport, as well as the reasons why they are likely to get less involved and the additional challenges they have to face when they do. Furthermore, it discusses the measures put in place by the IPC and by the National Paralympic Committees (NPCs) to counter this problem. The third section engages with the topic of prostheses, examining how these have been theorized and providing a historical overview of their employment by disabled individuals. Attention is also given to the fact that, thanks to recent technological advancements, people are now able to acquire enhancing tools and to the impact this can have on parasport.

Composed of three sections, the fifth and final chapter analyzes Grey-Thompson, Wafula Strike, and Pistorius' autobiographies. Section One focuses on the characteristics that these have in common, primarily illustrating the elements that make them both "somebody" and "some body" memoirs. Section Two concentrates on Grey-Thompson's *Seize the Day* (2001) and Wafula Strike's *In My Dreams I Dance* (2024), covering the effect that being women had on the athletes' sporting careers, as well as how they dealt with romantic relationships and their thoughts about motherhood. Furthermore, it explores how Wafula Strike's Kenyan origin affected her childhood, her consideration of her impairment, and her time as a wheelchair racer. Section Three, instead, revolves around Oscar Pistorius' *Blade Runner* (2012). It investigates his consideration of his prostheses and the controversy surrounding them, and how these became tools for him to reinforce ideals of able-bodiedness and toxic masculinity – notions also fostered by his family and his environment – which culminated in his killing of his girlfriend. Prominence is also given to the problematic media attention that followed this disturbing episode, particularly to its effort to downplay Pistorius' responsibility.

To conclude, in this thesis, I demonstrate through increasingly focused levels of analysis how being disabled and elite athletes places Paralympians in a particular and ambivalent position – a situation reflected in the fact that their self-life writings function as both “somebody” and “some body” memoirs. I also show the necessity of adopting an intersectional perspective, one which, in my research, specifically examines race, gender, and technology. This is essential to fully explore disability, as these interconnected elements significantly contribute to how the authors experience it. These findings are extremely important since the complex relationship between disability, the body, sport, and these factors is an area seldom investigated within disability studies, especially through self-life narratives. My work seeks to provide an initial step in addressing this gap.

1. Approaching Disability

1.1. From the "Norm" to the Medical Model

1.1.1. Where to Begin: The Concept of "Normalcy"

Contrary to what people might think, to understand disability, attention should not be addressed to the disabled person, but to the concept of the norm. This is because "the 'problem' is not the person with disabilities; the problem is the way that normalcy is constructed to create the 'problem' of the disabled person" (Davis 2013: 1). The notion of a norm and the social process of disabling are more recent than what would be expected, as they "only" started with industrialization. This can be proved by the fact that the word "normal" – and its derivates – with the current meaning of "conforming to a type or standard" and "according with, constituting, or not deviating from a norm" (Merriam Webster.com Dictionary n.d.) appeared in the European languages only around 1840. The same is true for the term "norm" – which has been used in the modern sense since 1855 – and with "normality" and "normalcy" – which appeared in 1849 and 1857 respectively (Davis 2013: 1-2).

Additionally, some sources seem to confirm that preindustrial societies were more accepting of people with disability. For instance, Martha Edwards' reinterpretation of Ancient Greek history demonstrates that they were often seen positively, especially when they had acquired their impairments in artisan activities or war. The theory that babies that were not "perfect" would normally be killed is also discarded. Another similar example regards intellectual issues, which were considered an integral part of small-town and rural life and, because of this, almost exalted by Romantic figures like William Wordsworth. Individuals affected by them were treated kindly and cared for by family and the community (Davis 2002: 40). Nevertheless, it should not be assumed that before the nineteenth century, there was not a concept that governed society. This was the notion of the "ideal", according to which there was an "ideal body" which was associated with gods and was not attainable by human beings. Consequently, because no one could have it, there was no social pressure (Davis 2013: 2). Indeed, its counterpart, the *grotesque*, was not like disability, which is almost always excluded from society and culture, but pervaded people and life, to the point that it was considered to have "a life-affirming, transgressive quality in its inversion of the political hierarchy" (Davis 1995: 25). This

paradigm was perfect for societies based on kingship and feudalism. However, with the development of capitalism, new types of subjectivities were necessary. A form of symbolic production that exalted the ideal and put everyone below that line was not adapted anymore, especially in a bourgeois civilization, which relied on a paradox. On one hand, the money and the power were concentrated in the hands of a few individuals; on the other, the principle that all men were equal was advocated. Nonetheless, on an economic level, this was neither possible nor desired by those in charge. It is in this context that the shift from the "ideal" to the "norm" occurred (Davis 2002: 93).

The main cause of it was statistics. The word, which appeared for the first time in 1749, initially referred to collecting information about the state to promulgate the most adapted policies. It was eighty years later, when the discipline began to be applied to the body to trace the history of health and diseases (Davis 1995: 26), that it started to prompt the idea of the "normal" as a compulsion, especially through the work of the French statistician Adolphe Quetelet. His contribution was taking the so-called "law of error" – which was employed by astronomers to find the exact position of a star by recording all of its spotting and then making an average of the errors – and applying it to human characteristics. The result gave birth to the concept of "l'homme moyen" or the average man. This was composed of "*l'homme moyen physique"* and "*l'homme moyen moral"* (Quetelet in Davis 2013: 2), meaning that both the body and the moral had a prominent role. This formulation had three main implications. The first was that, from that moment, the average became what to aspire to. The second was that the majority of the population had to be part of it, opposite to the "ideal" that was not achievable by humans. The last was that, if there was a "norm", there were also its extremes. These deviations could be moral – for example, having vices – or physical. If before being beautiful was considered a characteristic of gods, now physical beauty was supposed to be average. Consequently, "ugliness" in the body was seen negatively. It goes without saying that, in this context, people with disabilities were considered deviants (Davis 2013: 2-3).

If statistics has developed the concept of the "norm", another discipline is accountable for its establishment: eugenics. While the first one had propelled the idea that people can be divided into "standard" and "non-standard", the second aimed to improve humans to reduce the second category. One of the main figures in this field was Sir Francis Galton, cousin to Charles Darwin, whose concepts of the evolutionary advantage of the

fittest and the progressively improving body served as a basis for eugenics. Darwin's ideas already had an impact on people with disabilities, who were placed "along the wayside as evolutionary defectives to be surpassed by natural selection" (Davis 2013: 3). Galton took this even further. Convinced that some physical characteristics could be inherited, he invented the system of fingerprinting to show it. In his opinion, this proved that the body is standardized and has an identity – corresponding to its essence – which cannot be altered by any human action. Consequently, the individual "enters into an identical relationship with the body, the body forms the identity", including its physical differences (Davis 2013: 4). Another contribution by Galton was updating Quetelet's statistical theory by changing its name from "the error curve" to the "normal distribution" curve. This is important because, when considering human traits, some extremes that, according to Galton, should be regarded as positive – such as intelligence, strength, tallness, etc. – would have been regarded as errors. Galton preferred to think of them as a "distribution of traits". Even eliminating the idea of error, though, there was still the problem that in a distribution curve there are two extremes. Nevertheless, in some cases, one was preferable to the other. For instance, when taking height into account, one extreme was shortness, the other tallness. However, when attempting to perfect the human race, tallness had to be favored. Galton's solution to this problem was substituting the concept of average with that of ranking, that is to say, he changed the way to look at the curve from one that used the mean to one that used the median[1]. Taking again the example of height, with this approach, it would mean that tallness would become the highest-ranked trait. This "new ideal of ranked order" has reinforced even more the vision of what the human body should be (Davis 2013: 4-5).

Eugenicists grouped all the "unwanted" characteristics into the same category. This meant not only that people with disabilities were considered on the same level as criminals and the poor, but that their group encompassed all types of human variations, including, for example, hermaphroditism. All these deviations from the norm were seen as responsible for the "disease of the nation", and the idea of the body politic – that says that "if individual citizens are not fit, if they do not fit into the nation, then the national body will not be fit" (Davis 2013: 6-7) – got a foothold. One of the main "classes" of

[1] The mean is calculated by adding all values in a set and then dividing the result by the total number of values (Oxford English Dictionary 2025a), while the median is the middle value in a set of numbers that has been arranged in order of magnitude (Oxford English Dictionary 2025b).

people eugenicists tried to improve was the one they defined as "feeblemindedness"[2]. This group included mental illness, low intelligence, and also poverty since having a low income was considered synonymous with "inefficiency". Certain ethnicities were also associated with it. The American Charles Davenport, for instance, believed that the influence of immigrants coming from Europe would have impacted negatively the American population and crimes would have increased (Davis 2013: 6-7).

This association between disability and criminality – a link that is still hard to break – led to the term "defective class". Its consequences were unimaginable. In the English Parliament, laws were proposed to control people with mental disability, and, in 1933, the scientific magazine *Nature* supported the Nazi's proposal of a law to sterilize disabled individuals to avoid the continuation of inherited diseases[3]. While it might appear odd, Hitler's proposition was just the extreme application of the ideas of the American and British eugenics movement. The same was valid for his conclusion that it was the State's duty to protect the future by adopting concrete measures, such as proclaiming unfit those that "deserved" it and rendering them sterile (Davis 2013: 7-8).

To conclude, even if, as has been demonstrated, Lennard Davis has been a crucial figure in showing, especially from a historical point of view, how, without the notion of the "norm", there would not be the idea of disability (Davis 1995: 3), it is important to point out that he has not been the only one to theorize it. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson conceptualized the same idea in her book *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (1997). Indeed, she claimed that "Disability […] is the attribution of corporeal deviance—not so much a property of bodies as a product of cultural rules about what bodies should be or do" (Garland-Thomson 1997: 6). Therefore, she argued that, when a body is deemed as "extraordinary" it is not because of intrinsic "defects", but because it does not follow the "rules" established by individuals who possess favored characteristics, which supposedly allow them to assume an authoritarian position and attribute a state of inferiority to others. The term she used to

[2] It was Sigmund Freud who actually established the "eugenics of the mind" – by creating the notions of normal function and sexuality and contrasting them with the pathological, the perverse, and the criminal. Therefore, psychoanalysis is another concept that would not exist, without the idea of normalcy (Davis 2013: 8).

[3] Unfortunately, this was not the first time such an idea was proposed. In 1883, Alexander Graham Bell held a discourse called *Memoir upon the Formation of a Deaf Variety of the Human Race,* in which he expressed the fear that a race of deaf-mute people could rise from their tendency to marry each other. This led to the control of their reproduction (Davis 2013: 4).

describe the members of this group is the "normate". When trying to pinpoint their attributes by removing all the "marked traits", the profile that emerges is extremely narrow and can be applied only to a minority of people – white, heterosexual, able-bodied men. Still, they benefit from the neutral protective space of "normalcy" and stigmatize all those who represent "otherness", excluding them from social status and power. However, it is exclusively through the obviousness of the deviance of the "other", that the normative subject appears and is legitimated. Hence, disability cannot be investigated without considering its counterpart, the "normate" (see Garland-Thomson 1997: 7-9). Going back to Davis (2002), "the body is never a single physical thing so much as a series of attitudes towards it" (Davis 2002: 22). These will continue to be analyzed in all the next chapters.

1.1.2. From the Medical Model to the First Socio-Contextual Approaches

When someone starts to study disability, one of the first aspects they will learn is that there are two opposite ways to see it: the medical and the social model. The medical model is just the direct result, the structured theoretical conceptualization, of the notion of normalcy discussed above. Nevertheless, this does not mean there were no intermediate steps leading to it. For instance, Henry-Jaques Striker, in *History of Disability* (1999) explained that the return from the battle, at the end of the First World War, of thousands of injured and physically impaired soldiers who tried to reintegrate into their communities gave rise to the so-called "rehabilitation model". This propelled a new perception of rehabilitation that substituted the precedent prominent concept of cure. While the latter related to health and consisted of removing the issue, the former implied compensation for a deficit. This also coincided with the beginning of the development of prosthetics, which participated as well in the intention to make injured men fit again the ideal of able-bodiness (Hall 2016: 63). Returning to the medical model, it lies on the idea that there is a standard from which people with disability deviate. Its focus is on physical differences and disabled individuals are defined as those whose bodies look and act diversely and do not work properly. People are divided into groups according to their disability – the blind, the deaf, etc. –, while the social experience that they share is not taken into consideration (Shakespeare 1996: 95). The power is in the hands of non-disabled people, especially

professionals, who monopolize the research and practice fields, without letting participate the directly involved party (Shakespeare 2006: 18).

Even if the medical/social model dichotomy has become a central characteristic of British disability studies, in his book *Disability Rights and Wrongs* (2006), Tom Shakespeare explained that it has not been a core component to the initial conceptions of these two approaches. It was Micheal Oliver, in 1983, who formulated it, almost ten years later the document that laid the foundation of the social model was written. To be accurate, he did not even call them as they have been known until today, but he differentiated between the "individual model" or "personal tragedy theory" and the "social oppression theory". Furthermore, in 1996, he even said that "there is no such thing as the medical model of disability, there is instead, an individual model of disability of which medicalisation is one significant component" (Oliver 1996: 31 quoted in Shakespeare 2006: 15). By this, he meant that this approach was more than just the supremacy of diagnoses and professionals: he wanted to emphasize that it implied that the problem of disability was intrinsic to the person and originated from their physical diversity (Shakespeare 2006: 15). Nonetheless, his words initiated this binary distinction, which now is so complicated to dismantle.

Even though no authors have claimed to adhere to this model, there is a text that is considered to be its most representative. This is the *International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities and Handicaps* (ICIDH), written for the World Health Organization in 1980. As can be seen from its title, this document discerned between three different terms. "Impairment" referred to the "deviation from the biomedical norm" and encompassed the restrictions one had on a functional level. "Disability" was its consequence, indicating any limitations or lack of capability to do something in the way regarded as normal that derived from it. "Handicap" resulted from the other two and related to the impediments they produced in accomplishing a role viewed as the norm for a certain person, considering their sex, age, and every other cultural and social aspect. What is interesting about this text is that the intention behind it was completely the opposite of what it is actually remembered for. In fact, it aimed to make sure that handicaps were considered by healthcare, it pointed out the issues that resulted from them, and – above all – it fostered recognition of the social exclusion and disadvantage that disabled people encountered. Nevertheless, because it failed to represent how facilities,

policies, and environments impacted the extent to which an individual could participate in society, it was and still is associated with the individual approach (Shakespeare 2006: 15-16).

If even the text that is considered to be the manifesto of the "medical" model actually had some elements that makes it closer to what will become the social approach, it can be said that, although in the following decades, the two have been polarized, their opposition "is more about symbolism than actual content" (Shakespeare 2006: 18). This can also be observed in numerous other texts that, while maintaining an individualist approach, started to hint at the impact of context on disabled individuals[4]. Already in the '60s, studies argued about the significance of other people's attitudes, the way the environment can avoid "disabilities" becoming "handicaps", and the duties that non-disabled individuals had in improving disabled people's participation in society. And in the '70s, thanks to the first waves of disability activism, influenced by the fights for civil rights and feminism, it became even more common. In *The Meaning of Disability* (1976), Mildred Blaxter demonstrated that medical and administrative labels were totally different from the definitions used by disabled people themselves and their families and claimed that impairment is part of a continuum with normality and not its contrary. Moreover, using the concept of "stigma" rather than the political one of discrimination, she talked about the limitations imposed not only by the social environment, but also by the systems of welfare, employment, social security, and healthcare. In 1981, the group Disability Alliance launched the collection *Disability in Britain: A Manifesto of Rights* in which they supported community living instead of institutionalization, demanded legislation against discrimination, and affirmed the necessity to put into question the traditional approaches, to come to the point of asking for "a social model of disablement". Although they are characterized diversely, it is one of the earliest cases where a distinction between "medical vs. social" is made, preceding even Oliver. Nevertheless, this text still adheres more to the individual one. In fact, despite arguing for the leadership of people with disabilities, it is primarily written by non-disabled scholars. A year later, in *The Experience of Handicap*, David Thomas, while remaining more oriented toward impairment rather than the environment, referred to the emerging disability movement

[4] The first distinction between impairment and disability – on which the social model is founded –, dates back to 1958, when it was explained by the American Medical Association (Shakespeare 2006: 19).

and the efforts to obtain civil rights. And, in 1983, David Locker claimed that the social context of impairment was as big an issue as impairment itself. While these texts shared several characteristics with an individualist approach and did not use the social model terminology, they still made some formulations that can be associated with the latter, acting as a springboard for the first social-contextual approaches (see Shakespeare 2006: 19-22).

The earliest ones to arise were almost exclusively centered on people with learning difficulties. The first emerged from the normalization theory, which concentrated on their deinstitutionalization. Based on rights, it evolved, especially in the United States and Nordic countries, in the ’60s and '70s from non-disabled scholars. Despite this last aspect could be regarded as opposite to a social model perspective, it could be explained by the fact that its main focus was individuals with learning disabilities, who still do not have a prominent role in research, partially because of their impairment. Furthermore, it *did* propel a change in how this group of people was seen, leading to self-advocacy and a more inclusive investigation between the 1990s and 2000s (Shakespeare 2006: 22). Similar to this approach was the Try Another Way system, which was elaborated by Marc Gold in the late '60s. It was based on an idea that would become a key element of the social model. This was “the inversion of traditional causal explanations: rather than the individual being the problem, the problem is the failure of systems and environments to include and accommodate that person” (Shakespeare 2006: 23). In the case of the Try Another Way theory, this meant that the lack of learning was not seen as the result of the learner’s incapacity, but as that of a flawed teaching method. Therefore, it rejected deficit approaches and labels. The last model, focused primarily on normalization and de-institutionalization, was based on the notion of “handicapism”. This was formulated by Robert Bodgan and Douglas Biklen, who outlined it in an essay in the journal *Social Policy* in 1977. They defined this term as “a set of assumptions and practices that promote the differential and unequal treatment of people because of apparent or assumed physical, mental or behavioural differences” (Biklen and Bogdan 1993: 69 quoted in Shakespeare 2006: 23), and it was made up of three elements: discrimination, prejudice, and stereotype (Shakespeare 2006: 23).

The socio-contextual approaches that followed were not restricted to a single type of impairment. The one that arose in North America, for example, considered all people

with disabilities as a part of the same minority group. The discrimination against them had to be fought through civil rights legislation, which would have assured protection to the individual. Even if the UK and US movements had mirrored each other, two elements differentiated the "minority group model". The first one was that the distinction between impairment and disability – which is one of the foundational principles of the British version and will be discussed later – has never been made by any North American author. Secondly, it retained from taking it to the extreme and defining disability as social oppression and regarded it more as a "restriction of activity". However, this did not signify that it did not take into account the role of the social, political, and cultural environment. For instance, in 1978, Frank Bowe published a study titled *Handicapping America* in which he illustrated six types of social barriers: architectural, attitudinal, educational, legal, occupational, and personal (see Shakespeare 2006: 23-25).

Also in the Nordic countries, a socio-contextual approach that embedded every kind of impairment developed. Contrary to what happened in the USA and the UK, it did not result from activism, but research. There, scholars started studying disability early on, thanks to their wealthy welfare systems. At first, their primary focus was evaluating services. Successively, their perception shifted, and they included the role of the environment in people's lives. In the '60s, an umbrella term (*funksjonshemming*) was coined for "disabled people". Even if it still had a medical connotation, it was more neutral than the previous words. It was the *Norwegian White Paper on Disability* that, in 1967, together with demanding the end of segregation and civil rights, impressed on it its "contextual" sense. In the '70, this increasingly gained more importance: the term definitively changed from "disabled", which described a person, to "disability", the word "being neutral as to whether the obstacle is in the person or the environment" (Shakespeare 2006: 25), which did not encompass anymore only the physical level, but it included also social structures[5]. It is from this shifting that the "Nordic relational approach" unfolded. It was based on three main ideas: the first is that disability is a mismatch between a person and the environment: this happens both because of the differences of the individual and because the surroundings are not shaped yet to accommodate everyone. The second is that disability is situational: for example, someone

[5] It is crucial to point out also that in Nordic languages the British distinction between "impairment" and "disability" cannot be translated since there are not two distinct words that can convey their meanings.

with a visual difficulty is not disabled when they talk on the phone. The last one is that disability is relative and part of a continuum, not a dichotomy. Despite this model being broadly adopted in the Nordic countries as a theoretical framework and political principle, it has not produced major results, especially in government support – still predominantly based on medical diagnoses –, education, or research. Additionally, it has not led to attention being paid to discrimination and oppression (Shakespeare 2006: 25-26).

To summarize, claiming that there are only two approaches to disability is limiting, and contrasting them as if one were "bad" and the other "good" is incorrect. As this chapter has demonstrated, the individual/"medical" model is more complex than what is believed, and the family of the socio-contextual approaches is composed of more "members" than the social model. In the next section, this will be discussed in detail together with its critique.

1.2. From the Social Model to the End of Identity Politics

1.2.1. The Social Model and Its Critique

Described as "social constructionist" or "social creationist", the social model shifted the focus from disabled individuals and their difficulties to how society excluded them. Their experiences started to be valued as they were regarded to be dependent on context and caused by social arrangements (Shakespeare 2006: 29). Its key element was the distinction between impairment and disability. The former referred to physical limitations, and it was individual and private. The latter related to social exclusion, and it was structural and public. The opposition of these two concepts led to two other dichotomies. The first one was the juxtaposition of this new approach with the individual/"medical" model. While that saw impairment as a personal deficit and reduced it to issues of cure, rehabilitation, and prevention, in order to eliminate it, the social model aimed in the opposite direction. In fact, impairment had to be accepted, and attention had to be paid to removing disability, which was seen as "a culturally and historically specific phenomenon, not a universal and unchanging essence[6] (Shakespeare 2013: 216). The

[6] Evidently, the two approaches' differences extended beyond their vision of impairment to other aspects, including the terminology they used. The individual/"medical" model employed "people with disabilities", which was condemned by the proponents of its successor because, in their opinion, it indicated that "disabilities" were deficits of single individuals. What they argued for was the expression "disabled people"

second binary bifurcation that resulted was between disabled and non-disabled people. The latter were considered the cause, or at least contributors, of the segregation of the former, who viewed themselves as an oppressed group and requested anti-discrimination laws, obstacles removal, and independent living. Additionally, they wanted the monopoly of research, services, and organizations that concerned them as they claimed to be the only ones who could provide the best insights and solutions (Shakespeare 2013: 216).

The first text that propelled the creation of the social model is *Stigma: Notes on the Management of a Spoiled Identity* (1963) by Erving Goffman. After explaining that "'stigma' is created through the interaction between a person and their social context, in the relationship between the stigmatiser and the stigmatised" (Hall 2016: 22), the author explored the evolution of the concept over time, from Ancient Greek, when there was the habit of physically marking people who were considered different, to nowadays discrimination against every type of so-called "abnormality". This demonstrated that the key point of this notion is that it is fluid and dependent on the historical moment. In fact, because it is a social category it can be assigned to different groups at different times, according to a given society's hierarchical structure and prejudices. It is evident, then, why it can be said that Goffman's conceptualization contributed to the social model: in the context of disability, this framework implied that it is not a fixed condition inherent in the individual, but the result of social behaviors and attitudes (Hall 2016: 22).

Nonetheless, it was at the beginning of the 1970s in Britain that this approach actually developed, thanks to the work of the *Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation* (UPIAS). Created by Paul Hunt and Vic Finklestein, it primarily maintained that barriers played a crucial role in segregating people with disabilities: "We find ourselves isolated and excluded by such things as flights of steps, inadequate public and personal transport, unsuitable housing, rigid work routines in factories and offices, and a lack of up-to-date aids and equipment" (UPIAS Policy Statement 1974 quoted in Shakespeare 2013: 215). Therefore, it aimed to provide opportunities for individuals to partake in society and shape their existence. UPIAS was not the only activist group led by disabled people that emerged at that time in the UK and that aligned with a social-

---

because it highlighted that the disabling came from something external, and not from their bodies. However, it is incorrect to assume that all persons who employ the "people-first" terminology do so because they adhere to the medical approach: most use it because they want to highlight "the common humanity which disabled people share" (Shakespeare 2006: 32-33). It is fundamental to specify that, in this dissertation, the two terms are used interchangeably without implying any connotation.

contextual perspective. Another one was the Liberation Network of People with Disabilities, which published its policy in 1981. Its central argument was that, while it is undeniable that the main reasons for social divisions are economic, they are supported by psychological convictions of inherent superiority or inferiority. Furthermore, they asserted that, differently from other minorities, disabled people endure intrinsic problems because of their impairments[7]. Their solutions to cope with these issues were: creating a community for mutual help, having control over media representations, increasing positive self-awareness, and eradicating segregation. However, it was the UPIAS' approach that dominated, especially as a result of two successive events that propelled its spread. First, its adoption, in 1981, by the British Council of Organisations of Disabled People. Second, the fact that its delegates ensured its global embracement at the first Disabled People's International World Congress in Singapore that same year (Shakespeare 2013: 214-215).

The social model primarily had three positive outcomes. The first was delineating a political strategy: if individuals with impairments were disabled by the environment, then removing barriers needed to be the priority. On a broader level, this meant eliminating discrimination, and fighting for and obtaining civil rights was seen as the solution. The 1995 Disability Discrimination Act was the first step, followed by several other pieces of legislation. The second one was on disabled people themselves: understanding that they were not the ones at fault was immensely relieving for them. The awareness that they did not have to change, but society had the responsibility to, transformed their feeling of sorry for themselves into anger, which empowered them to ask for equality (Shakespeare 2006: 30). Additionally, it reinforced their sense of identity (Shakespeare 2006: 33). Lastly, it influenced disabilities studies, whose focus broadened to include cultural and social questions and, as it had happened in other fields such as feminism, lesbian and gay studies and post-colonial studies, affiliated itself to its corresponding movement of liberation (Shakespeare 2006: 30).

Nevertheless, the British social model also had limitations, which have fueled criticism in the last few years. To begin, it ignored the importance that impairments have on most people with disabilities. Rejecting completely the individual/"medical" approach

[7] It is extremely crucial to point out the position of the Liberation Network of People with Disabilities on this point since the fact that the UPIAS-created approach did not take into consideration the impact of impairments is one of the main reasons why it has been criticized recently.

threatened to imply that they are not an issue and that individuals are disabled only by society, not also by their bodies. This might be true for some types of impairments, such as those that do not have any complications and do not degenerate. Nevertheless, for people who have conditions that worsen over time or that cause pain, it is impossible to neglect them (Shakespeare 2013: 217-218). In fact, no matter how hard one works to eliminate barriers and change society, some issues can never be completely solved. To address this critique, in 1999, Carol Thomas proposed a developed version of the social model that included what she defined as "impairments effects", which were the direct and limiting repercussions of impairment on people. This concept allowed, for the first time, to include in the approach personal experiences and psycho-emotional levels. Nonetheless, her efforts to reform met with resistance from the movement (Shakespeare 2006: 39). For example, when this criticism was moved to Micheal Oliver, he rejected it, claiming that the approach arose from disabled activists' perspectives and thus it could not be accused of not leaving the space to investigate the impact of impairments (Waldschmidt 2017: 21). As if these remarks on the erroneousness of ignoring impairment were not sufficient, it made generating impairment-specific associations and responses appear useless, and, even if it was not what the UPIAS meant, it could be interpreted as refusing prevention, cure, or rehabilitation. This is problematic considering that there is no reason why a single-impairment organization cannot be beneficial, especially since people affected by the same condition share the same medical and social issues. At the same time, there is no logical basis for the assertion that concentrating on removing obstacles requires abandoning medical research and intervention (Shakespeare 2006: 31-32).

The second critique moved to the British social model is that, in real life, it is complex to separate impairment and disability. First, despite the tendency to consider them opposites, a link exists between them. As a matter of fact, to experience the disablement provoked by an obstacle, someone must have an impairment (Shakespeare 2006: 34). "It is the interaction of individual bodies and social environments which produces disability" (Shakespeare 2013: 218): both are fundamental, but not enough by themselves to produce it. For instance, a step is not an issue for someone who does not have a physical limitation (Shakespeare 2013: 218). Moreover, if no connection is established between the two, then the term "disability" would represent any restriction

imposed by society. Second, impairments often result from or are aggravated by social arrangements. This could happen both because of an omission or because of an action. An example of the first might be the exacerbation of symptoms – such as pain – because the medicines that could mitigate them are not available owing to the lack of economic resources. An instance of the second is the obstacles or poorly designed services that might cause injuries (Shakespeare 2006: 34-35). Thirdly, what is considered an impairment depends on social judgment, which is influenced by values and attitudes. Micheal Oliver, when presented with the comment that the social model neglected cultural aspects, answered that he did not think of them as important, considering that most disabled individuals are still in a position of poverty and deprivation. This opinion, on the one hand, might be comprehensible if the principal aim is to establish a political agenda. On the other hand, however, it means not attributing the right importance to the relevance of culture for society and its impact on how disability is perceived (Waldschmidt 2017: 22). For instance, also the number of individuals regarded as having any type of condition changes based on the definition that is valid in a certain space and time (Shakespeare 2006: 35). "Impairment is always already social, while disability is almost always intertwined with impairment effects" (Shakespeare 2006: 35). Hence, scholars claim it would be more correct to consider impairment and disability as a part of a continuum, not as a polar dichotomy (Shakespeare 2006: 37).

The last cause for which the social model has been condemned is the concept of a "barrier-free world" that it implied. This supports the idea of "Universal Design" which was described by Ron Mace in 1997 as "the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design" (Centre for Universal Design 1997 quoted in Shakespeare 2006: 44). Conceptualized by architects, engineers, and designers, its purpose was, for example, to provide information in different formats, to have sizes and spaces that are suitable for every body type, etc. Even if the limitations of this concept were pointed out from the beginning, supporting the possibility of a "barrier-free utopia" was fundamental for those who adhered to the social model since it was based on the premise that eliminating the obstacles that disabled individuals face was feasible (Shakespeare 2006: 44). Nevertheless, over time, criticism of this idea has gradually increased, especially because practical factors hinder its realization. First, some parts of the natural world are impossible

to make accessible: for example, beaches will always be difficult to cross for someone with a mobility issue. Urban settings are not necessarily easier to adapt: historic buildings, for instance, are limited in the transformation they can undergo. Furthermore, some accommodations are not adapted to all types of impairments: blind people prefer indented pavement and steps, while wheelchair users favor smooth surfaces and ramps. At the same time, in some cases, different solutions are necessary even for the same conditions: some visually impaired individuals consult text in Braille, others through audio files. Economic resources are another issue and might lead to finding more convenient ways to solve a problem. To provide an example: making every line and station of the London Underground usable for people in wheelchairs would require massive investments, so Transport for London has equipped itself with almost only accessible buses to provide an alternative to those who cannot use the metro. In addition, sensory and physical impairments are easier to address than, for instance, learning difficulties since writing, reading, and other cognitive abilities are fundamental for participation in society (Shakespeare 2013: 219).

In the cases where it has actually been possible to implement the notion of "Universal Design", new challenges have emerged. The first one is that the creation of always more inclusive public spaces has brought to light that it is not sufficient to explain disability. In fact, it highlights more complex and difficult-to-eradicate forms of segregation, raising political and moral questions about what is a priority and what is "worth" investing in. Moreover, if despite environmental changes disabled people remain in a situation of disadvantage, the social and the civil rights model prove again to be not a definitive solution. Nonetheless, it must be acknowledged that, even if the issue of oppression is multifaceted, they still are necessary because they reduce social exclusion. Additionally, they have a symbolic function as they challenge the common attention paid to what individuals with impairments cannot do, emphasizing that deficit approaches are wrong since, for instance, using a wheelchair is not an inferior way to move around than walking (Shakespeare 2006: 44-45).

In conclusion, nowadays, almost every key idea of the social model has been put into question. In this chapter, it has been argued that, even in the most accessible environment, any impairment will still have some disadvantages and that, even if the utopia of a barrier-free world is fundamental in fighting exclusion, intrinsic obstacles will

impede “solving” the issue of disability. Social model supporters are relativists “in that they claim that having an impairment is a different but equal form of embodiment to not having an impairment” (Shakespeare 2006: 50). Nonetheless, as has been illustrated, there is no way that the experiences of people with disabilities can be equated to those of able-bodied individuals. In the next paragraph, a novel alternative to the social model will be discussed.

1.2.2. New Proposals: The Interactional and the Cultural Approaches

The first attempts to change the common understanding of disability date back to 1999 when Carol Thomas argued for the necessity of a relational approach – where “relational” referred to the connection between intrinsic and extrinsic factors – and recognized the role of what she called “impairment effects”. Nevertheless, while she tried to mold the social approach to include what it lacked, she refused to discard it because she considered it symbolically important as it separated disability studies from medical sociology and directed them toward the disability movement. Moreover, she persisted in defining disability exclusively in terms of oppression, and this had several negative consequences. The first, which also applied to the “traditional” British social model, was that it “obliged” scholars to find that individuals with disabilities are oppressed, leaving them only to determine the extent to which this happens. The second was that it made her appear to be separating from the whole of people who have an impairment (and might endure its effects) the sub-group of those who are “disabled”, that is to say, those who also experience oppressive behavior. This proved to be ambiguous and ineffective since, in real life, there are some situations in which a person belongs to the general category and others where they pertain to the subset. The third was that it did not take into account the frequent positive social relations established between disabled and non-disabled individuals (Shakespeare 2006: 57).

After Thomas, other scholars, particularly those who adhered to the Nordic relational approach and Van den Ven and a Dutch team in 2005, tried to combine medical and social aspects. For them, integration was influenced by three types of factors – individual, social, and those related to the support system, such as assistive devices and professional care – and would have been complete when 1) disabled people would have functioned in an ordinary way; 2) they would have mixed with others and established

relationships; 3) they would have contributed to society through work or volunteering; 4) they would have tried to fulfill their potential; and 5) they would have had the control over their own lives. Moreover, also the WHO started to recognize the role of the environment and to use the word "disability" to describe the entire experience of people in its International Classification of Functioning Disability, and Health (ICH), the revised version of the ICIDH published at the beginning of the 2000s (see Shakespeare 2006: 58-60).

Nevertheless, it was Tom Shakespeare, in his book *Disability Rights and Wrongs* (2006), who formulated a precisely delineated and sufficiently structured model to replace the two precedent ways of understanding disability. Defined as "interactional", it is based on the idea that "disability is always an interaction between individual and structural factors" (Shakespeare 2006: 55). The former are intrinsic to the single person and include the type and severity of the impairment, their attitude to it, their abilities and qualities, and their character. The latter depend on the context and encompass the accessibility of the environment, how others see and react to disability, and any other pertinent social, economic, and cultural aspects. What differentiates this model from the "medical" one is primarily that disability is not explained exclusively in terms of impairment, which is seen as a fundamental, but not the sole, component. At the same time, what separates it from the social approach is that disability is not defined purely as oppression. While recognizing the role that discrimination plays in people's experiences, it presumes that engaging with impairment cannot be avoided since no social arrangement could ever completely eliminate it (Shakespeare 2006: 55-56).

As has been recurringly explained, the only two ways impairment had been theorized before were as a "medical tragedy" by Oliver and as an aspect to deny or neglect by the social model (Shakespeare 2006: 62). In his approach, Shakespeare argues that it is actually a continuum. Those who ignore the fact that it is problematic and consider disability just as one more human variation see only its more moderate end; those who view disability as a tragedy that should be avoided in any way focus only on the most serious one (Shakespeare 2006: 60). Hence, he argues for the necessity of a nuanced and ambivalent perspective towards it. The way he finds to articulate this is by describing it as a "predicament", which, according to *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* is "an unpleasant, trying or dangerous situation" (quoted in Shakespeare 2006: 63). Even if it

still has a negative connotation, it does not suggest that it is impossible to escape, providing even an opening for some positive aspects. In fact, the adjective "trying" communicates that, even if an effort has to be made to surmount the issues that impairments entail – which undeniably make life more complicated – these could be overcome. At the same time, this new definition acknowledges that impairment is not neutral and that the number of people affected and the extent to which they are impacted should not be dismissed. This implies that preventing and soothing it should be a crucial part of any social measure taken to deal with disability. Additionally, since "predicament" describes a challenge impossible to avoid even if frequently minimized, it can be applied not only to impairment but also to the theorization of environmental barriers and all other sides of embodiment, such as menstruation pain for women (Shakespeare 2006: 63-64). This leads to another point which is that "impairment is a universal phenomenon, in the sense that every human being has limitations and vulnerabilities and ultimately is mortal" (Shakespeare 2006: 64). Impairment is more likely to be acquired, especially with ageing, than to be congenital. Nonetheless, the Human Genome Project has proved that everyone has hundreds of genetic mutations, that make the individual susceptible to it (Shakespeare 2006: 64-65).

Even if this awareness that "everyone is (or can potentially be) impaired" has some benefits as it helps to accept, and not fight or deny, the difficulties everyone has and pushes to re-think disability, it should not result in overlooking the experiences of disabled people, especially because the differences in type and extent of impairment impact the level of social disadvantage that they need to face. If a reason why impairment diversities have been neglected needs to be found, this would probably be the fear of establishing a hierarchy, because it would imply that some disabled people are more worthy or better than others. However, even if it is complex to outline it precisely because it depends on subjective and cultural factors, Shakespeare argues that it is undeniable that some conditions limit more than others and that most people adopt a ranking. Nonetheless, all these considerations do not refute two cornerstones of the social model which are that able-bodied usually judge impairment more negatively and limiting than those who are personally affected by it and that society's behavior is a major contributor to disabled people's lives, often creating more troubles than their impairment (Shakespeare 2006: 60-61).

Another key aspect of the interactional approach, which has been ignored in all previous theoretical frameworks, is the role of motivation and personal attitudes. People should be encouraged to see their disabilities more positively and to increase their self-confidence and self-esteem. A way to achieve this is by joining a disabled-led activist group. Hence, Shakespeare's model considers and values every option that can enhance the quality of life of individuals, be they medical, environmental, or psychological (Shakespeare 2006: 61-62). It is in this context that the notion of "appropriate interventions" enters the picture: because there are "multiple and non-contradictory options […], a debate is needed as to which approach is the most appropriate or cost-effective for different impairments or specific individuals. There can be no prior assumption that one approach is automatically preferable in all cases" (Shakespeare 2006: 62). This translates into a political agenda. Because this model highlights every issue related to disability – including how some impairments require extra expenses – it claims that it is crucial to move beyond the goal of treating everyone in the same way. For instance, even if it is right to promote the employment of individuals with disabilities, a group will remain unemployed and cannot be employed. Thus, society needs to make extra investments to equate disabled people with able-bodied, and this means not only providing the same opportunities but also redistributing the resources. Moreover, because everyone will experience disability and dependence on others at some point, it is important to acknowledge this should not be the interest of just a part but of the whole population (Shakespeare 2006: 66-67).

There is another author, though, who proposed an alternative to the precedent individual/"medical" and social approaches, and this is Anne Waldschmidt (2017), who formulated what she defined as the "cultural model of disability". Nonetheless, she clarified that, in doing so, her intention was not to discard the previous frameworks (especially the social one) but to make people aware that "disability is *both* socially and culturally constructed" (Waldschmidt 2017: 23-24). To begin, she explained that "culture" has to be interpreted broadly as "the totality of 'things' created and employed by a particular people or a society, be they material or immaterial" (Waldschmidt 2017: 24). This includes – but is not limited to – objects, organizations, ideas, narratives, traditions, and attitudes. Using such a wide understanding allows for the consideration of processes of categorization of disabled and non-disabled individuals, their role in society, their

relationships, and the mechanisms of subjectivation. It is from this premise that Waldschmidt's model arises, putting into question "the commonly unchallenged "normality" and investigating "how practices of (de-)normalization result in the social category of […] disability" (Waldschmidt 2017: 24). This puts forward four main ideas. The first, which can also be found in Shakespeare's interactional approach, is that "impairment" and "disability" are not well-defined concepts which automatically cause discrimination, but products of daily discourses, mass media and the academia. In fact, they refer to a mix of cognitive and physical characteristics to whom a given society attributes positive or negative connotations. The second point is that, therefore, "disability" describes an "embodied category of differentiation". This means it exists only when an "abnormality" is perceived and regarded as relevant in a specific cultural and historical context, according to a dualistic system for bodily diversities that contrast healthy and normal to diseased and deviating (Waldschmidt 2017: 24). Thirdly, considering that both the concepts of "ability" and "disability" result from social practices that generate normality and deviance, the "individual and collective subjectivities of 'disabled' and 'non-disabled' persons are interdependent" (Waldschmidt 2017: 24). Lastly, relying on a model that takes into account such a wide range of aspects permits also acquiring original insights into culture and society, for example on how identities are produced and defined or how exclusion and inclusion is implemented by institutions. All these considerations lead the author to argue that, thanks to this approach, disability studies can become "dis/ability studies", to highlight that the object of research is not just one of these categories but the intersection of both (Waldschmidt 2017: 24-25).

In conclusion, new frameworks are now replacing the individual/"medical" and the social models. The first one is the interactional approach formulated by Shakespeare, which is based on the assumption that it is the combination of intrinsic and extrinsic factors that composes the experience of disability. Shakespeare has not been the first to propose this idea, but it is his merit to have theorized it in a structured way, encompassing also a new consideration of impairments – which he sees as "predicaments" – and the importance of finding "appropriate interventions" for every single individual. The second is the cultural model proposed by Waldschmidt which is based on applying cultural studies methodologies to the analysis of disability. Nonetheless, other scholars, while they agree that outlining innovative theoretical approaches is necessary, argue that they should

not be based on the notion of "disability"; on the contrary, they claim that their starting point should be the dismantling of the category. This will be discussed in the next section.

1.2.3. The End of Identities and Dismodernism

The principal author to have doubted the concept of "disability" as an identity category is Lennard Davis. While he concedes that identity politics might initially be useful in academia or political movements, he claims that "if disability studies were to ignore the current intellectual moment and plow ahead using […] antiquated models, the very basis for the study of the subject could be harmed by making its premises seem irrelevant, shoddily thought so, and so on" (Davis 2002: 10). Although "disability" has always existed, its social and cultural theorization was developed only in the 1970s and acquired prominence the following decade. It was during this period that the concept of "disability" as an identity was introduced – through the normalization and positive reframing of the negative definitions employed by oppression – and that a cohesive force was created to obtain rights. In the 1990s, a second phase began, led by a new generation of people who had always lived in this new sense of self. Their aim was to redefine the fight and reformulate the identity in more complex and nuanced ways. Nevertheless, they never questioned the notion of "people with disabilities" as a distinct and clear entity; on the contrary, they protected it. In addition to being the unmistakable consequence of the times when the medical model dominated, the goal was to eliminate disability, and disabled individuals had no interest in associating with the impairments of others, there is another reason why the second "wave" did not challenge it (Davis 2002: 10-11).

To find the cause, it is fundamental to understand the current of thought of the late 20th century: Postmodernism. Primarily deconstructionist, it shook unifying theories and problematized attempts to create wholes. However, this was not applied to the concept of group identity, because challenging it would have meant taking part in that same oppressive system that had established categories and segregated others in the first place. Furthermore, its idea was that, while all other areas could be attacked, it was impossible to doubt the notion of being. This led to an expansion of multiculturalism: even if unity was rejected, the whole could be accepted if it was composed of all different parts. It was in this context that the disability movement pushed to be included. At the same time, however, Postmodernism wanted to silence a current of thought that was just emerging,

Essentialism (a reductionist way of thinking that said that identity was tied to and written on the body) and did so by asserting that the body and the identities around it were performative and socially constructed. Apart from being a contradiction compared to what had been said until that moment, this implied that all identities could be dismantled and that the whole of identity politics could be challenged. Davis (2002) starts from this issue and considers disability as the answer. To be so, it needs to be completely revisited, but being the most recent group identity, it presents minimal resistance to change (see Davis 2002: 12-14). "Most importantly […] disability may turn out to be the identity that links other identities, replacing the notion of postmodernism with "dismodernism" (Davis 2002: 14).

The first way disability is reexamined is by questioning the practices currently implemented to eliminate it. Although the eugenics model is now rejected, particularly because of how Nazism applied it, this does not mean that the ideology behind it has completely disappeared. As a matter of fact, it can be found, for instance, in the Human Genome Project, which has been created to eliminate the flaws of people who are genetically "defective". Albeit it is not totally wrong to use genetics to deal with some conditions – since they might result in severe health issues –, this is leading to two problematic procedures: genetic engineering and prenatal screening (Davis 2002: 19-20). The former relies on "the illusion […] that single genes will be discovered that can be "fixed" with an improved consequence" (Davis 2002: 20). Nonetheless, not only for most issues there is not a single genetic cause that can be held accountable, but intervening in genes can have more negative outcomes than repairing them. For example, some "genetic faults" contribute to the protection from pandemic diseases. Prenatal screening, instead, consists of doing genetic tests to prevent giving birth to children with genetic issues. This has two negative consequences. First, it has given rise to a new problem in the courts: the right not to be born (Davis 2002: 20-21). This imposes "compensatory payments to such children who had the right not to be born and whose parents were not able to exercise that right because of lack of information" (Davis 2002: 21). Evidently, this is opposed by people with disabilities, who assert that their parents might have aborted them had they known of their impairments. Second, it can be improperly expanded and used, for example, to control the sex of babies. In countries like China or India, female fetuses can already be aborted, while in the USA it has been declared that there are some cases where

it is considered acceptable to select the embryos according to their sex and throw away the rest. Therefore, these two practices are challenging whether disability is actually a state that needs to be erased and what a "defect" really is (see Davis 2002: 19-22).

The second way by which "disability" as an identity is contested is from a conceptual point of view. To begin, it is contradictory to think of it as a fixed category, "when the power behind the concept is that disability presents us with a malleable view of the human body and identity" (Davis 2002: 26). Successively, as has been already said, it lacks internal coherence since it includes hundreds of different conditions. This results in encompassing a group too large of individuals, which has two practical consequences. The first is that it leads to the always-increasing impossibility of guaranteeing equality to everyone. Second, it brings widespread resentment because a substantial number of people are allowed specific privileges and rights. To address the issue, federal courts have started to use narrower definitions of disability, but this had the negative counter-effect that, in most cases, it was decided against the disabled person (Davis 2002: 24). As if this was not sufficient, this class will expand further as the population grows older. Lastly, the aspect of cure complicates it even further. Even if it is improbable, research could advance significantly offering a solution for several conditions. Moreover, technological progress could lead to always more sophisticated devices like prostheses or cochlear implants. This raises the following issue: if someone is cured or is provided with tools that allow them to "overcome" their impairment, could they still identify as disabled? (Davis 2002: 24-25).

Several ways have been found to cope with the "conceptual dead end" surrounding "disability" and all other identities. It has been said that, although there might not be evidence for X, people are X anyway and might suffer for being so. Others assert that, although until now no biological proof of X might have been encountered, this does not mean that it will not be found in the future and that, in the meantime, individuals can stick to the idea of being X. Some claim that, even without evidence of the existence of X, people might desire to hold to it because it is their identity. Lastly, certain argue that, even if X is not a biologically demonstrated identity, it is important to maintain it as a category to obtain laws for those who have been discriminated because they supposedly belonged to it (Davis 2002: 18-19). This last point is, for instance, supported by Tobin Siebers. Referring to disability, he argues that a well-defined and celebrated collective conception

of identity and a community are crucial for activism, for fighting for "fundamental democratic principles such as inclusiveness and participation" (Siebers 2008: 93 quoted in Hall 2016: 7). Also Simi Linton maintains that disability is a distinctive identity: while recognizing that "it is not somatised or essentialist […] but socially constructed", she affirms that it is a "position that a person actively "claims" (Hall 2016: 7). This is reflected also on the language she employs: the first-person pronoun "us" to identify people with disability and the adjective "nondisabled" to refer to able-bodied individuals, as if disability were the norm (Hall 2016: 7). Nonetheless, Davis (2002) declares that all these positions are not rationally defendable and that even trying to remake these identities involves relying on the categories used to create the oppression in the first place (Davis 2002: 18-19).

Hence, he formulated a new framework, one that considers the progress of science – while avoiding returning to a simple conceptualization of identity (Davis 2002: 23) – and that starts with disability. The reason for this is that, since it is made of several self-definitions, it is an "unstable category"[8]. Its unsteadiness permits it to separate itself from all other groups, which exhausted their potential, and to transcend the issues of identity politics, which has a principal limit: its exclusivity. Only the people with a certain characteristic belong to a specific category. Because there is an abundance of traits, groups proliferate. However, this causes the dissipation of identity politics. It is the same phenomenon observed with the notion of "disability": because it includes an excessive number of definitions – and, therefore, of individuals – its existence is doubted. Moreover, if with Postmodernism, the subject started to be considered fragmented and resistant to definitions, but it was still complete, unified, capable, and independent, now the notion that it is crucial to convey is the opposite (Davis 2002: 25-26). "The dismodern era ushers in the concept that difference is what all of us have in common. That identity is not fixed but malleable. That dependence, not individual independence, is the rule" (Davis 2002: 26). This is why disability is the most adapted to begin this new Dismodernist ethics: because it can be the framework to argue how all groups, on the basis of markings or physical characteristics, are chosen for disablement by a larger regulatory system. "So it is paradoxically the most marginalized group […] who can provide the broadest way of

[8] It is important to emphasize that, as has been said, this applies as well to its counterpart: impairment (Davis 2002: 23).

understanding contemporary systems of oppression" (Davis 2002: 29). While Postmodernism still relied on the idea that all identities were equal under a dominant subject, who was white, male, and "normal", this new model claims that all people are incomplete and interdependent. Establishing a classification based on "wounded" individuals is not needed, because everyone is considered to be wounded. The Dismodernist subject is disabled but can be completed by interventions and technology, which they accept since they permit them to be functional. For instance, in the same way someone with a mobility impairment is incomplete without an electric wheelchair, a citizen is incomplete without information systems and ways to guarantee order and peace. Whereas Postmodernism was based on Foucault's theory that "the state is power and citizens are docile bodies" (Davis 2002: 31), supporting the "hegemony of normalcy", Dismodernism shifts this dichotomy of "docility and power" and substitutes it with "impairment and normalcy". Nonetheless, the former is the standard, and the latter an illusion. Protection is not granted anymore by a supreme entity, but by all the population to all its members. Thus, it is not necessary to define a class safeguarded by the law, because everyone is equally defended. The goal is to create a barrier-free world, and the concept of Universal Design is the guide for every move (see Davis 2002: 29-31).

The ethics of the body that derives from this new way of thinking is composed of three aspects. The first is the "care *of* the body". An integral part of a market-driven society, it rests on the idea that the human body is not complete without purchasing infinite products for self-care. This includes technological devices, such as contact lenses, breast implants, insulin regulators, etc. This makes the body influenced by consumerism appear normal and implies that disabled people have to adhere to this model as well. The second element is described as "care *for* the body" and is also connected to the economy. It concerns the industry dedicated to taking care of the body, which includes, for instance, healthcare and dependent care. Massive investments are undertaken for it, making it one of the largest sectors of numerous countries. This suggests that how resources are allocated and how it is organized is indicative of the ethical character of a given society. The last factor is the most crucial one as it propels freedom and includes and investigates the other two, which, on the contrary, cause oppression. This is "caring *about* the body". In fact, it is only when people start to care about the questions discussed until now that a Dismodernist view of the body emerges (Davis 2002: 27-28). It consists of concentrating

“on human and civil rights that have to be achieved to bring people with disabilities to the awareness of other identity groups” (Davis 2002: 28). Particularly, the attention should be focused on discrimination and issues of classes, considering that most people with disabilities are poor, undereducated, and unemployed. Additionally, it should be acknowledged that the situation is significantly worse in developing countries and for women and female babies, who are often forced to undergo procedures that cause disablement (Davis 2002: 28-29).

To conclude, according to Lennard Davis, the shift to Dismodernism started when the different identities began to fight against discrimination based on their category. However, its complete establishment is a long process, especially because even if some notions have been questioned, this does not mean that the corresponding forms of oppression have ended. In any case, to summarize, Dismodernism suggests that the common characteristic of all bodies is being different. It is the awareness of being nonstandard that leads to the Dismodernist ethics. Furthermore, even if ideologies up to this point have tried to convince individuals of the perfection of the body, the only universal experience that can be distinguished is precisely its limitations (Davis 2002: 31-32).

2. Disability, Literature, and the Academia

2.1. Studying Disability

2.1.1. The Academic Field of Disability Studies

Considering that the theoretical framework illustrated in the first chapter is grounded in disability studies, it is now essential to explore the development of this academic field. Intersectional approach scholars, such as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2013: 916 in Hall 2016: 23) and Dan Goodley (2011: 10 in Hall 2016: 23), agree that it started from the struggles to obtain civil rights. The publication, in 1975, of the *Fundamental Principles of Disabilities* by the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation asserted that it was the society that disabled individuals with impairments (Barker and Murray 2018: xiii). This was the point of departure as it sparked people's awareness that they were not the ones at fault and that the situation needed to change. Moreover, while, in the UK, legal protection against discrimination based on gender and race had been provided by the *Sex Discrimination Act* and the *Race Relations Act*, promulgated in 1975 and 1976, respectively, people with disabilities lacked similar legislation. Therefore, led by organizations like the Disabled People's Direct Action Network (DAN), protests arose, spanning from marches to more radical demonstrations. This brought about the enactment of the *Disability Discrimination Act* on 8 November 1995[9]. The *Act* defined disability as "physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on a person's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities" (Lewis 2020) and protected against discrimination in education, transport, employment, the distribution of goods, and the exercise of public functions (Lewis 2020)[10].

It is in this context that disability studies emerged, gaining an always-increasing institutional acceptance. This happened for three reasons. First, by changing law and culture, activists made disability visible and contributed to helping other people understand that it is part of everyone's life and has a primary role in any discussion on human embodiment (Bérubé 2002: x). The second reason is that most individuals who

[9] In 2010, the *Disability Discrimination Act* was superseded by the *Equality Act* in England, Scotland, and Wales. Nevertheless, the *Equality Act* substantially retained the provisions of the previous legislation (Lewis 2020).

[10] The same had happened in the United States, where the efforts to achieve civil rights led to the passage of the *Americans with Disabilities Act* in 1990 (Hall 2016: 25).

were participating in the civil rights movement also turned to research (Shakespeare 2006: 68). Ultimately, according to Hall, for instance, "academic scholarship is itself a form of activism" (Hall 2016: 23-24). Some turning points of this first phase were the publication, in 1980, of the first issue of the first interdisciplinary journal of the field, *The Disability Newsletter*[11]; and the foundation, in the USA, of the Section for the Study of Chronic Illness, Impairment, and Disability (SSCIID) of the Social Science Association, in 1982. Renamed the Society for Disability Studies (SDS) in 1986 (Barker and Murray 2018: xiv), this was followed by other similar organizations in the UK, Canada, and New Zealand (Hall 2016: 24). Moreover, in 1990, the Disability Research Unit, which ten years later became the Centre for Disability Studies, was opened at the University of Leeds, and in 1994, the first disability studies course in the USA was proposed at Syracuse University (Barker and Murray 2018: xiv).

In this initial phase, the discipline was primarily political science and sociology-oriented. It was only in the late 1990s that a shift, which has been defined as the "linguistic turn", occurred. Disability studies moved towards the humanities (Hall 2016: 53) and started to dedicate itself to processes of "recuperation" and "revelation", looking back to previously ignored people with disabilities in history, culture, and literature and researching social constructions of "ability" and "disability" across the centuries. Moreover, it aimed to expose discrimination and stereotypes, while trying to reframe disability as a positive, collective identity and as a critical category. The "revelation" could be found in the acknowledgment that disability is everywhere once individuals learn how to search for it and that as a field of study can provide numerous opportunities (Hall 2016: 24)[12]. Therefore, even if, after twenty years of campaigns and activism, this change towards abstract and theoretical concepts appeared as detracting from more serious issues, it participated in the understanding of ethics, politics, aesthetics, and attitudes toward people with disabilities. Furthermore, it offered innovative perspectives on issues such as citizenship, discrimination, and healthcare (Hall 2016: 52-53).

[11] In 1985, it would be renamed *Disability Studies Quarterly* (DSQ). The *DSQ* is the official journal of the SDS (Barker and Murray 2018: xiv).

[12] For instance, for Lennard Davis, the awareness that "the 'them' of […] identity studies is ultimately the social collectivity of 'us'" demonstrated how an apparent niche subject could actually include the whole of the literary domain (Davis 2002: 44), revitalizing it in a time when scholars believed that there was nothing new to investigate (Hall 2016:53).

Even though its expansion has not been the same everywhere, from the beginning of the new millennium (Hall 2016: 25), the field has been undergoing a new phase. This is characterized by the division of scholars around certain topics, such as the distinction between the notions of "impairment" and "disability" and the validity of the social model, as has been observed in the previous chapter. This is impeding further progress. However, it is crucial to point out that "these critiques illustrate the power of disability studies to trouble and destabilize" (Hall 2016: 26), considering that it puts into question even its own foundational points. This presents new challenges to scholars, who are trying to find new ways to theorize disability, and Shakespeare's interactional approach is one such example (Hall 2016: 26-27). Indeed, recently, a new sub-section of the discipline got a foothold. Called "critical disability studies", it deals with the nowadays multi-faceted conception of disability as "a civil and human rights issue, a minority identity, a sociological formation, a historical community, a diversity group, and a category of critical analysis in culture and the arts" (Garland-Thomson 2013: 917 quoted in Hall 2016: 25). This also has its own scientific magazine, the *Journal of Literary and Critical Disability Studies*, established in 2007 by the Liverpool University Press. It is the first publication dedicated to humanities-oriented research and investigates several issues in culture, literature, and critical theory related to disability (Barker and Murray 2018: xvii).

I would like to conclude with a quote by Lennard Davis, taken from the "Introduction" to the second edition of *The Disability Studies Reader* (2006), which summarizes what has been suggested until now:

> It is not as if disability studies has simply appeared out of someone's head at this historical moment. It would be more appropriate to say that disability studies has been in the making for many years, but, like people with disabilities, has only recently recognized itself as a political, discursive entity. Indeed, like the appearance of African-American studies following rapidly on the heels of the civil rights movement, there is a reciprocal connection between political praxis by people with disabilities and the formation of a discursive category of disability studies. (Davis 2006: xvi quoted in Hall 2016: 23).

Moreover, I found it important because it introduces another important aspect of disability studies, which is that, since the beginning, it has been connected to other "identity-based" fields, interested in rights and justice, that emerged at the same time, like Women's Studies and African-American Studies (Hall 2016: 23). This implies that the concept of disability cannot be understood without investigating its relationships with other identities. Its intersectionality will be discussed in the next section.

2.1.2. Exploring Intersectionality

The term "intersectionality" indicates the theoretical approach that deals with the connections between different "categories" (Kafer and Kim 2018: 123). Specifically, employing such a framework to disability results in analyzing how a person who identifies as disabled "will also be raced, gendered, trans/nationally sited, aged, sexualized and classed" (Goodley 2001: 33 quoted in Hall 2016: 39). Being a minority with a debated history and tangible effects, this is particularly important since it helps to solve gaps within current theorizations. Moreover, this also allows scholars to investigate more thoroughly how social oppression works, considering that it is constructed through the interplay of identities. Nevertheless, this does not mean these can be overlapped or their corresponding activist movements can be merged. For instance, in her essay, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference" (1984), Audre Lorde claimed that attention should be paid to "the edges of each other's battles" to acknowledge that struggles do not correspond completely and that it is necessary to work also across differences. She also said that in the same way that academic work that does not consider a category contributes to maintaining its corresponding form of discrimination, researchers who focus exclusively on one of them reinforce oppressive behaviors (Lorde 1984: 123 in Kafer and Kim 2018: 123-124). In his book *Disability Theory* (2008), Siebers introduced the concept of "adjacency" to emphasize that there are points of overlap but also of distinction (Siebers 2008: 1 in Hall 2016: 39). Similarly, in *The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public* (2009), Susan Schweik has challenged the use of analogy – the idea that, for example, a disabled individual's experience is "like" the one of an African American – and proposed the notion of "confluence", implying a more fluid theoretical framework that acknowledges that identities shape each other (Schweik 2009: 143 in Hall 2016: 39-40).

However, in their essay "Disability and the Edges of Intersectionality" (2018), Kafer and Kim suggest that the ways intersectional approaches have been applied to disability until now have significantly complicated the situation rather than improved it (Kafer and Kim 2018: 125). The first has been to define it as "the missing term" as if disability could just be added to the list of all other identities. This proved problematic because it did not investigate how these rely on ableist assumptions and did not consider

that disability itself needs to be reinterpreted when issues concerning gender, for example, are handled. Although I recognize the validity of these observations, I would argue that seeing disability as "the missing term" is still a useful point of departure since disability and ableism are often forgotten when talking about identities and oppression. The second questionable way has been treating "disability" as "the same as" other categories, even to the extent of substituting its terminology in other frameworks. Apart from suggesting that words do not have their own history, this seemed to imply that disability is dissociated from other constructs. Sometimes this has been taken even further by saying that it is the necessary successor to outdated categories. Whenever this has been done, it was usually to prove the erroneousness of identity politics, with the negative consequence of isolating disability and avoiding challenging power and oppression. At the same time, some scholars, including, for example, Lennard Davis (2011), have separated disability from the context to prioritize it over other categories: ableism has been seen either as serving as the foundation for other structures of discrimination or as the most oppressive (Davis 2011: ix-x in Kafer and Kim 2018: 127), with the disabled body acting as "the ultimate other" (Kafer and Kim: 2018: 128). In addition to eliminating diversities among identities, such a belief also suppresses differences of impairment, overlooking how some disabled individuals are more discriminated against than others, for example when protective legislation is not enforced equally (see Kafer and Kim 2018: 126-128). In relation to this, according to Kafer and Kim (2018), how differences within the category of disabled – or differences in how the label is applied – lead to different levels of inclusion in the public and academic spheres is notably an issue that could be investigated by a comprehensive intersectional disability studies perspective (Kafer and Kim 2018: 131). This means, therefore, that this should also focus on dominant categories and the systems that create and maintain them (Kafer and Kim 2018: 129). Concurrently, it should put into question disability studies as a whole, with the awareness that every form it might take would be different than the allegedly unmarked – that is to say, white and Anglo-European – discipline that has been predominant until now. Moreover, it should also deal with cases in which disability is not necessarily the central element, but other forms of oppression are, allowing scholars to explore how it is employed to put into the spotlight alternative structures of marginalization (Kafer and Kim 2018: 133-134).

At this point, I find it essential to examine some concrete examples of how this intersectional approach can be effective. The first one concerns the combination of disability studies and feminism, which have more in common than would be expected. To begin with, they both originated from movements requesting rights. Secondly, even if in the last three decades these separations have started to be questioned, they were both founded on a dichotomy: in the same way that disability scholars distinguished between "impairment" and "disability", so did feminists discern between the biological category of "sex" and the cultural one of "gender". Lastly, they share the way that women's and disabled bodies have been conceptualized, that is as fragile, lacking, and demanding. Nonetheless, despite these commonalities, not only have these two disciplines not been combined until recently, but they have actively distanced themselves and used the other in a denigrating way. For instance, feminist studies have often relied on ableist discourses to articulate their position: the suffragettes demanded the vote asserting that if it was granted to men with physical and cognitive impairments, then non-disabled women should also have been enfranchised. Likewise, recent campaigns asking for equality have done so by emphasizing the importance of ability and independence (see Hall 2016: 40-43). It was Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, in 2005, who tried to define feminist disability studies as an academic discipline (Garland-Thomson 2005: 1560 in Hall 2016: 43). According to her, one of their principal points of convergence is "the visual politics of appearance and its interaction with ideas about beauty. Disability and feminism offer vantage points from which normalizing, regulatory practices to do with looking and appearance can be scrutinized" (Garland-Thomson in Hall 2016: 43). Apart from this, its primary goal is to work against discrimination towards women with disabilities who are more likely than able-bodied and disabled men to be unemployed, poor, and victims of sexual abuse because of the "double negative" that female disability entails. Moreover, it offers new insights on contemporary issues such as healthcare and reproductive technologies. For example, it is thought-provoking to see how a feminist pro-choice campaign for the right to have an abortion interacts with the claims against prenatal genetic screening by activists with disabilities (Hall 2016: 41-42).

Another field that has started to intersect with disability is queer theory. Despite it being incorrect to compare them because they risk becoming a metaphor for each other, these two subjects share several characteristics that lay the groundwork for their recent

paired investigation. First, like feminist and disability studies, also queer theory arose from an activist movement, especially for HIV and LGBT rights. Moreover, they both reappropriated words – "cripple" and "queer" – that have a negative connotation to use them as an empowering way of positively affirming their identity, following the same narrative of "coming out". Additionally, these terms are employed not only as adjectives but also as verbs to describe the process of challenging and overturning the social imposition of heteronormativity and able-bodiness. Most important, though, it is that also queer theory relies heavily on Lennard Davis's "normalcy studies", investigating how the notion of heterosexuality is inextricably linked to and dependent on its counterpart: homosexuality (Hall 2016: 45-47). To remain on topic, I would suggest that Davis himself utilized an interactional approach when he was arguing how Postmodernism and science can be applied to question identity politics (Davis 2002: 14). Regarding the notions of "gender" and "sexual orientation", his example of intersexuals – once called "hermaphrodites" – protesting against the procedure of being operated upon as newborns to assign them one gender underscored its non-binary nature. Transexuals see it as a continuum and establish themselves in it through surgery, hormones, and stylistic choices. Even genetics contradicts traditional beliefs: it is a natural and not-rare phenomenon that males are born genetically females and vice-versa. Sexual orientation is also debated: although previously it depended only on the choice of a sexual partner, it is not possible anymore to describe it exclusively according to it. For instance, should a relationship between a female-to-male transexual and someone who claims to be a man be regarded as gay? Additionally, also in this case, people have historically tried to find an explanation with genetics. In fact, there have been theories that said that, if a "gay gene" could be found, the question of "gayness" could be justified. However, there is not a single gene that can determine the life of a human being (Davis 2002: 16-17).

There is another category that Davis (2002) dismantled: race. He argued that it is not possible to associate an individual with a specific "race" through their DNA, demonstrating it has no genetic base (Davis 2002: 14). Moreover, the concept is being complicated even further by the increase of reproductive technologies, as in the case in which a fertility doctor implanted in a woman not only her own fertilized embryos but also those of another couple. This resulted in her giving birth to non-identical twins, one white and the other black. Lastly, this minority is also being questioned from a statistical

point of view. While in the past multiracial identification was forbidden, now the notion of "mixed race" is expanding, allowing people to check more than one box on the national census (Davis 2002: 16). This proves there is another possible intersection to consider: the one between disability studies and postcolonial theory. Even in this case, the two disciplines have multiple similarities, the first being their interest in silenced populations. Just as disability studies researched how disabled people have been marginalized from a political, academic, and social point of view, in a postcolonial context too the issue of voicelessness and how colonized individuals' experiences have been discussed or theorized have been tackled. Furthermore, the two minorities share "parallel and intersecting" histories of oppression: in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, disabled subjects and people from ethnic minorities were exhibited together in freak shows, and successively, were victims of the pseudo-science of eugenics, who deemed them as inferior. However, until now, the only times these two fields have intermingled have been to borrow from each other a significant amount of language and use the other as a metaphor. In fact, in postcolonial texts, references to impaired bodies abound: for instance, in addition to the loss of agency, amputation symbolizes the physical and psychological violence inflicted on colonized black subjects (see Hall 2016: 47-49). This has also been done by scholars who employed frameworks of one discipline to discuss the other: for example, when talking about care, Tom Shakespeare (2000) described it as a "potentially invasive relationship that replicates the unequal power dynamics of the colonial/'native' relationship" (Hall 2016: 48). Furthermore, on the one hand, disability studies tends to consider whiteness as archetypal for the body with a disability; on the other, the idea of independence that race theory supports is linked to a non-disabled body (Hall 2016: 49).

Nonetheless, collaborating could benefit both disciplines as it would question some basic assumptions on which each is founded. For instance, applying a postcolonial perspective could promote the globalization of disability studies. If it has been said that "normalcy" – and consequently "impairment" and "disability" – is a socially constructed notion, this means that it changes according to the time and place. However, there is the tendency to assume that what has been theorized in Europe and America automatically applies to people in the Global South, where actually most people with disabilities live and who have impairments caused by war, civil conflicts, nuclear testing, etc. What

should be done, therefore, is to detach from the implied universalism that characterizes the discipline – and particularly the social model – to concentrate more on differences. This, paradoxically, leads back to the local (Hall 2016: 49-50) – to what Snyder and Mitchell (2006) have defined as the "cultural locations of disability" – with the goal of, to say it with Barker and Murray's terms (2013), highlighting "specific located examples of disability in cultural contexts" (Mitchell and Snyder 2006: x and Barker and Murray 2013: 65 in Waldschmidt 2017: 23). This implies also being aware that the view of disability, that is spreading now, as a positive identity that has to be celebrated and seen with pride might contrast with the need in other parts of the world to see recognized a past of violence and injustices. Yet this tension is productive because it challenges and offers new prompts for disability studies, allowing it to become more diversified (Hall 2016: 51-52).

To recapitulate, scholars have recently started to recognize the importance of applying an intersectional approach to disability studies. This chapter has demonstrated how, even if sometimes the way they did so has been counterproductive, discussions about the interaction between disability, feminism, queer and race theory can benefit all the fields involved and disclose new insights. Now that I have talked about the rise of disability studies and its connection with other academic disciplines, I will focus on another kind of intersectionality, which will be the topic of the next section: the one between disability and literature.

2.2. Literary Disability Studies

2.2.1. Representing Disability in Literature

Literary disability studies appeared in the 1990s when the "linguistic turn" discussed above occurred. Employing methodologies informed by the social model, it took inspiration from feminist, queer, postcolonial, and race theories[13] that had begun developing reframing reading strategies for canonical texts and creating innovative paradigms to interpret the representations of individuals from their respective minorities. Two works propelled the establishment of this new field – *Enforcing Normalcy* (1995) by

[13] I regarded it as significant to highlight how this becomes another point to support an intersectional approach.

Lennard J. Davis and *Extraordinary Bodies* (1997) by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson – by taking theoretical frameworks by literary and cultural studies to apply them to disability depictions (Barker and Murray 2018: 3). What emerged was that, throughout history, disability is constantly present in literature (Barker and Murray 2018: 1). This is a paradox if one considers how, instead, it is marginalized in society (Hall 2016: 30). This can be explained by the fact that, as Michael Bérubé affirmed, disability stimulates narration and imagination because it "demands a story" (Bérubé 2005: 570 quoted in Hall 2016: 3). According to David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder it is its "very unknowability that consolidates this need"[14] (Mitchell and Snyder 2000: 6 quoted in Hall 2016: 3). Hence, it can be said that, if a body with a disability features in a storyline, it is rarely portrayed per se (Barker and Murray 2018: 1).

Moreover, this is frequently paired with a value judgment related to what that body means, "it arouses notions of 'deviance' or, conversely, being 'special'; provides an example that shocks, creates fear, or invites pity; or functions as the subject of spiritual or philosophical contemplation" (Barker and Murray 2018: 2). However, the issue is that, precisely because it evokes other connections, disability is often not perceived, hidden behind other (non-disabled) matters deemed as more fundamental. For instance, the character that gives its title to William Shakespeare's *Richard III* explicitly claims that his physical impairment is the reason for his evilness, but he does so in a way that his actual disability becomes less prominent than its function (Barker and Murray 2018: 2). Besides being, therefore, a "moral index" to evaluate disabled characters themselves, disability also becomes a measure of others' ethical worth, based on how they treat those considered inferior (Hall 2016: 32). In any case, thus, disability is used as a textual device, as a metaphor (Barker and Murray 2018: 2), founded on ableist ideas of adherence to or deviation from the norm. Literary disability studies aim, thus, to describe and deconstruct how power structures influence how disability is written about. This prompted the formulation of two main theories: "narrative prosthesis" – articulated by David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder in 2000 – and "aesthetic nervousness" – developed in 2007 by Ato Quayson. These underscore the complexity of disability narratives while pointing out how these promote understanding of how writing, reading, and performing are embodied

[14] This is also reflected in the everyday life of people with disabilities who, contrary to nondisabled individuals, are often asked to explain their stories and bodies (Hall 2016: 3).

processes that can also influence style and structure, leading to the awareness of a "disability aesthetic" (Barker and Murray 2018: 4-5).

Related to this, Lennard Davis put forward the idea that the development of the novel itself as a literary form is inextricably linked to disability since its goal was to produce and promote the normative. He argued that this can be proved by the fact that its protagonists, in accordance with the establishment of middle-class hegemony, were "ordinary people […] put in abnormal circumstances" (Davis 2013: 9). This is the opposite of what occurred in the previous predominant genre of the epic, where characters, in line with the leading notion of the ideal, were heroic.

> I am not saying simply that novels embody the prejudices of society toward people with disabilities […] I am asserting that the very structures on which the novel rests tend to be normative, ideologically emphasizing the universal quality of the central character whose normativity encourages us to identify with him or her. Furthermore, the novel's goal is to reproduce […] normative signs surrounding the reader […] this normativity in narrative will by definition create the abnormal, the Other, the disabled […] and so on. (Davis 2013: 9).

Nonetheless, this idea has been criticized by other scholars like Hall (2016) because it neglects the fact that novels can have numerous forms and critics can read a given text in different ways (Hall 2016: 33). Personally, I agree with the latter opinion because I think that the immense potential of novels derives precisely from their capacity to encompass a wide range of genres, plots, characters, etc. which authors can "play" with, and saying that they can only spread a given idea risks to be reductive and counterproductive.

Intersecting disability with literary and cultural studies is also impacting the theorization of the relationship between impaired bodies and their social contexts, especially given the recent critiques of the social model for its disregard of the role of impairment in an individual's life. Anticipated by the introduction of the concept of "complex embodiment" by Tobin Siebers in his *Disability Theory* (2008) to show how "the body and its representations [are] mutually transformative" (Siebers 2008: 25 quoted in Barker and Murray 2018: 6), this relation is at the center of the recently developed "cultural model" which has been described in the previous chapter. Focused on recognizing and supporting all aspects that contribute to the experience of disability, it also gave rise to the discourse around "disability gain", which is the awareness of the numerous ways disability can enrich humanity. The field and the approach have increasingly grown in the past few years, which has led to the establishment, as has already been mentioned, of the *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* in

2007. Edited by David Bolt, it has contributed to creating a corpus of studies, which now includes analyses of how disability functions in specific narratives (exploring its portrayals across genres, historical periods, places of origin, impairments addressed, etc.) (Barker and Murray 2018: 6-7) and is methodologically hybrid, mixing literary research with cultural considerations, qualitative investigations and critical theory (Barker and Murray 2018: 8).

There are three reasons why literature is especially adapted to exploring disability. The first is that the flexibility of how texts make meaning allows a comprehensive examination of the "actual realities" of disability, in all its diverse forms of experience. The second is that, contrary to most contemporary research, which employs "people-based" methods that are time-consuming and demand people to be put through medical inspection and social control, the study of texts does not necessarily require the participation of individuals with disabilities themselves. Even if it cannot be said that literary works are direct and unmediated representations, it is also true that their depictions of disability are influenced by the predominant ideologies of their time, so they are not completely detached from reality. Furthermore, their creative and aesthetic dimensions help scholars to understand how the body and the mind are perceived in the real world (Barker and Murray 2018: 10-11). The last one is that it can have a pedagogic purpose since it can reach a wide and varied audience. It could be used to underscore the works that support oppressive opinions about normalcy and reinforce stereotypes about disability to challenge them. At the same time, it could be employed to spread subversive representations (Hall 2016: 4), helping to "re-frame" disability (Hall 2016: 43). This also implies that there is a link between art and activism, given also by the fact that disability portrayals can offer a platform to discuss contemporary issues such as care, bodily alteration, assisted suicide, etc. (Hall 2016: 14).

Now that an overview regarding the development of literary disability studies as an academic field has been provided and its importance has been highlighted, I deem it significant to delve into the two theories mentioned above: "narrative prosthesis" and "aesthetic nervousness". These will be discussed in the next two sections.

2.2.2. Narrative Prosthesis and the Body as a Metaphor

Formulated by David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder in 2000, the theory of "narrative prosthesis" tries to explain the "perpetual discursive dependence on disability" in literature (Mitchell and Snyder 2000: 47). The authors argued that the function of disability in texts is double; firstly, it represents a recurring set of traits; secondly, it is a metaphorical device. Concerning this, they claimed that "disability has been used throughout history as a crutch upon which literary narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive potentiality, and analytical insight" (Mitchell and Snyder 2000: 49). The narratives that particularly rely on disability are the so-called "open-ended", that is to say, those that not only resort to but explicitly emphasize the "play" of several meanings. Evidently, all texts can be interpreted in an infinity of different ways, but "open-ended" narratives "openly perform their textual *inexhaustibility*" (Mitchell and Snyder 2000: 48). This is crucial when dealing with disability representations, especially if it is considered that disability is a socially defined and changeful identity and that, in literature, is a disruptive element. In fact, the disabled body, with its "vulnerability and variability", works as a metaphor for what resists society's effort to "enforce normalcy" and becomes a tangible proof of physical limitations that cannot be textually dismantled in any way, causing thus the "open-endedness" to collapse (see Mitchell and Snyder 2000: 48-50).

Another aspect that, according to Mitchell and Snyder's explanation in the chapter "Narrative Prosthesis and the Materiality of Metaphor" (2000), contributes to making the deviation from the supposed norm a favored literary device is that it provides countless opportunities. As Barbara Maria Stafford claimed, "there is only a single way of being healthy and lovely, but an infinity of ways of being sick and wretched" (Stafford 1994: 284 quoted in Mitchell and Snyder 2000: 54). The "defects" are precisely what justify the presence of an "inferior" character and what draw the attention of the narrator and – consequently – of the reader. Furthermore, these provide narratives with the chance to engage in an "explanatory compensation" of differences, making them understandable to, thus, correct, or "prostheticize" them. However, it is fundamental to point out that this seldom leads to the acknowledgment that disabled people are actually a culturally stigmatized group: the character's impairment is treated exclusively as a biological fact. Mitchell and Snyder also illustrated the stages of this type of account: to begin, the

divergence is introduced. Typically arising with suddenness, this is presented with the reactions that it elicits, which consist of, for example, a stare, a gesture of repulsion, a scornful or pitiful remark, etc. Secondly, the existence of the story is justified because the necessity of the explanation of the origin and the consequence of the deviation emerges. It is in this phase that the story acts its "compensatory function", working to arouse interest around a subject that has been disparaged earlier. Thirdly, the difference moves from the edges of the narrative to the center; lastly, this is redeemed, repaired or permanently eliminated. This might be done through its social acceptance, a cure, or its extermination with the aim of purifying society. Alternatively, after the deviance has been established to justify the need for an explanatory narrative, it is ignored (see Mitchell and Snyder 2000: 53-57).

The authors then delved into why disability is often not perceived in literature. Firstly, they explained that this happens because most people do not have the tools to analyze the impact of the representations of disability, so they just absentmindedly perceive them. Furthermore, this occurs because they are used to considering impairment as an individual and isolated circumstance, without acknowledging that it (and its stories) is actually the result – at least, I would add, partially – of societal issues. The problem is that overlooking disability portrayals gives rise to the formulation of the theory that it is marginal, or even absent, in literature. This might lead to criticism of the disregard for such a crucial human experience. Additionally, people with disabilities might start to think that they have been erased from each discourse outside the medical sphere as part of a cultural repression that contributed to their discrimination. Nevertheless, as has already been demonstrated, disability presence is far from insignificant in literary works (Mitchell and Snyder 2000: 51-52).

Going back to the role of the body within the "narrative prosthesis" theory, Mitchell and Snyder explained as well that literary depictions convey the concept that "if form leads to content or 'embodies' meaning, then disability's disruption of acculturated bodily norms also suggests a corresponding misalignment of subjectivity itself" (Mitchell and Snyder 2000: 57). This tendency of "reading" the body appearance can be traced back to physiognomics, a discipline that developed in the eighteenth century simultaneously and within the framework of the concept of the norm and eugenics. Believing that qualities, both positive and negative, could be seen in the body, its practitioners claimed

to be able to predict behavior without waiting for empirical evidence (Mitchell and Snyder 2000: 58-59). Nonetheless, Mitchell and Snyder clarified that disabled individuals have always been the object of interpretations. Indeed, the oldest extant cuneiform inscriptions – which date back to around 3000 and 2000 B.C. and were found in Mesopotamia – are a catalog of one hundred and twenty presages resulting from the reading of the "deformities" of Sumerian fetuses and calves and sheep' livers. It is crucial to point out, however, that although the type of predictions made from physical differences has changed from a macro to a micro level – while these tablets were used to predict larger occurrences like the results of conflicts and harvest cycles, in the modern era, the assumed information they provide is concentrated on a single individual – in literature, both continue to be employed, exploiting the infinite ways disability can be understood and contributing to its sense of obscurity (Mitchell and Snyder 2000: 60-61).

The last aspect of Mitchell and Snyder's "narrative prosthesis" theory that is important to discuss is their suggestion that the disabled body is used as a metaphor because it "offers narrative the one thing it cannot possess−an anchor in materiality" (Mitchell and Snyder 2000: 63). For instance, if it is used to represent personal or social degeneration (Mitchell and Snyder 2000: 47), the "textual embodiment concretizes an otherwise ephemeral concept within a corporeal essence" (Mitchell and Snyder 2000: 62): giving a concrete form to an abstract notion allows it to enter the tangible world, being, therefore, easier to grasp. This is even more true in the context of text-based forms because it enables them to reach a level of knowledge that would be unattainable with their insubstantiality. The issue is that this "materiality of metaphor" confines the disabled body to a limited system of symbolic meanings that positions it in an opposite and complementary relationship with the "healthy" embodiment (Mitchell and Snyder 2000: 63). In fact, it is not possible to tell the story of the latter without contrasting it with the former, which is responsible "to bear out the symbolic potency of the message" (Mitchell and Snyder 2000: 64). The reason is that, as has already been said, the body draws attention exclusively when it is collapsing, a process whose meaning is nevertheless influenced by ideological and socio-political viewpoints. However, for the body to communicate, "it must be spoken for" since it does not have a language of its own. It is precisely the narration of a body with a disability that gives meaning to a textual body through the symbolic way it has been represented throughout history (Mitchell and

Snyder 2000: 64). Regarding this, the authors maintained that the focus of disability studies should not be, as it has often been claimed, to look for more positive representations of disability, "but rather a thoroughgoing challenge to the undergirding authorization to interpret that disability invites" (Mitchell and Snyder 2000: 59-60). Even if I agree with them on this point, I do believe that finding disability depictions that do not necessarily provide an explanatory narrative and that do not rely on a corresponding relation between internal subjectivity and the external body *should* still be a goal of disability studies.

After discussing the framework of "narrative prosthesis", it is essential to consider as well the criticism that has recently been directed at it. One of the main opponents is Alice Hall (2016). Firstly, she asserted that, if attention is paid to the etymology of "metaphor," which sees it as "a vehicle for 'carrying' meaning from one place to another", then it is understandable why it can be viewed as a mediating device to make understand the concept of disability (Hall 2016: 36). Additionally, although she recognized that Mitchell and Snyder's theory undoubtedly has several positive outcomes like illuminating stereotypical narratives that would otherwise go unnoticed, highlighting the literary pervasiveness of disability, and encouraging a political reading of texts, she remarked that it is contradictory because, while they condemn the use of disability as a metaphor, they actually resort to one to formulate their conceptualization (Hall 2016: 37-38). Lastly, she claimed that their position on disability representations is conservative because the role they assign to disabled characters reinforces normalcy. This results in the fact that disability is never depicted for itself, but it is used to talk about social chaos or to convey details about the able-bodied protagonist. Nevertheless, Alice Hall (2016) has not been the only one to challenge the "narrative prosthesis" conceptualization. For instance, Vivian Sobchack (2005) observed how, although "prosthesis" has become a common critical framework, what it actually entails when it becomes a part of a person's body is seldom investigated (Sobchack 2005: 20 in Hall 2016: 65-66). Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (1997) and Micheal Bérubé (2005), instead, argued for the counterproductivity of automatically assigning a metaphorical understanding to a given disability portrayal. The former claimed that the tendency is to read it "metaphorically and aesthetically" to avoid seeing it politically. The latter asserted that, while helpful, the "narrative prosthesis" theory might be dangerously limiting as it causes critics to neglect the multiplicity of

depictions that exists and how metaphors are employed next to the material realities of disability. On this subject, he discussed the necessity of developing new strategies to read both (Garland-Thomson 1997: 10-11 and Bérubé 2005: 570 in Hall 2016: 37-38). Simultaneously, other scholars, like Amy Vidali (2010) and Stuart Murray (2012), while recognizing that metaphors need to be scrutinized since they influence how disability is socially perceived and that they should be reinterpreted and transformed, asserted that they should not be eliminated because they contribute not only to the structure of narratives but also to cognitive processes (Vidali 2010: 51 and Murray 2012: 249 in Hall 2016: 37-38).

In conclusion, I think that every aspect highlighted by Mitchell and Snyder as part of their "narrative prosthesis" theory is problematic. Disability and the disabled body should not be interpreted; they should not serve as a metaphorical representation of any other concept, but they ought to be acknowledged and depicted as another human experience. Additionally, in my view, narratives should not justify their existence by providing an explanation for them. Nevertheless, I do not believe that they should be held responsible: in my opinion, they "just" identified a historically recurring pattern, tried to illustrate why this developed, and even rejected it. At the same time, I also agree with the scholars who have claimed the importance of not reading automatically every portrayal of disability as a metaphor because this damagingly reduces and might lead to overlooking more complex and positive images.

2.2.3. Aesthetic Nervousness: Tension on Different Levels

The theory of "Aesthetic Nervousness" was formulated by Ato Quayson in 2007. Its core idea is that, when disability is present in literary texts, "the dominant protocols of representation […] are short-circuited" (Quayson 2013: 202). In other words, its presence challenges the established ways stories are narrated and characters are depicted. This causes tensions that can be perceived at different levels. The first is in the interaction between a disabled and a nondisabled character. The others regard, for example, the employment of symbols, the dramatic dimension, the structure of the plot, etc., to ultimately arrive at the one between the text and the reader, for whom "aesthetic

nervousness overlaps social attitudes to disability"[15] (Quayson 2013: 202). This is true not only when the reader is able-bodied (which is generally the case) but also when they have a disability, since it is actually the creation of a supposed normativity of the body, both in the real and the literary world, that is questioned (Quayson 2013: 202).

Quayson explained that, to elaborate on his notion, he was primarily influenced by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's description of the three reasons that cause real-life first meetings between nondisabled[16] and disabled individuals to collapse (Quayson 2013: 203). The first is that the former does not know how to behave with the latter; the second is that the "normate" (to use Garland-Thomson's concept) usually assumes that a disability outweighs every other characteristic; the last is "the discomforting dissonance" given by the fact that the feelings that the able-bodied person experiences (pity, fear, disgust, surprise, etc.) cannot be expressed according to social norms (Garland-Thomson 1997: 12). This last point is connected to the idea, rooted in the so-called "symbolic interactionism model", that humans "do not respond to the world directly, but instead place social meanings on it, organize it, and respond to it on the basis of these meanings" (Albrecht 2002: 27 quoted in Quayson 2013: 204). These are also assigned to types of corporeal diversity according to the "normate's" unmarked regularities, giving rise to a hierarchy of bodily features that establishes power dynamics. These, nevertheless, do not always translate to mechanisms of dominance, but also to expressions of anxiety and chaos, which result from the impossibility of making sense of what is different, obliging people to accept the unpredictability of the universe. In the context of disability, this also produces an enormous dread of losing control over the body (Quayson 2013: 203-204).

This approach is also relevant when dealing with literary works because characters perceive one another according to these symbolic associations and because, being fictional, they are themselves founded on these. This was demonstrated by Lennard Davis, another author Quayson drew upon for his theory (Quayson 2013: 204-205). Davis (2002)

[15] Quayson clarified, however, that this does not mean that there is an exact correspondence between the two. Although it is undeniable that a correlation exists, they are not equivalent because the effect provoked by literary portrayals of disability differs from the feelings generated by real-life encounters, which are influenced by stereotypes and confusion. So, even if the former can underscore aspects of the latter, it cannot be regarded as sufficient or as a replacement (Quayson 2013: 212).

[16] I found it important to point out that in the article "Aesthetic Nervousness" (2013), which has been the primary source for this section, Quayson exclusively employed the term "nondisabled" to refer to individuals who do not have a disability. I see his choice as a provocative attempt to shift the perception to consider "disability" as the unmarked characteristic and able-bodiness as the deviance. In this dissertation, however, both terms are used interchangeably, with no underlying meaning.

suggested that the dichotomous opposition between normal/abnormal, which emerged between the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, actually gave rise to the realist novel. According to him, this dualism unfolded a series of plotlines, which typically began with the initial disruption of the protagonist's social condition and continued with their attempt to revert to their former status. The issue was that, with time, undesirable and unethical traits started to be progressively depicted as disability, establishing an association between this and the integrity of the state's class system (see Davis 2002: 95-98). Even if Quayson argued that deformation has always been used as a starting point for narratives and that realism is a cultural construct (so it is inaccurate to say that it emerged at a specific moment), he gave Davis credit for recognizing "the disabled body as *structurally constitutive* to the maintenance of the novel's realism". In fact, in its effort to present a verisimilar world, it relied on unrecognized beliefs about social order related not only to a given "understanding of class relations" but also to "an implicit hierarchization of corporeal differences" (Quayson 2013: 206). It is, thus, on these two authors that Quayson relied to elaborate his notion of "aesthetic nervousness". As a matter of fact, he claimed that it is sparked when traditional ideas of "wholeness and normativity" are questioned through disability depictions (Quayson 2013: 203-204) and that it is based on "the dialectical interplay between unacknowledged social assumptions and the reminders of contingency as reflected in the body of the person with disability" (Quayson 2013: 206).

Before discussing the last two sources Quayson took inspiration from, it is essential to point out two other aspects that, in his opinion, characterize disability and its representations. The first is the fact that they fluctuate "uneasily between the aesthetic and the ethical domains, in such a way as to force a reading of the aesthetic fields […] as always having an ethical dimension that cannot be easily subsumed under the aesthetic structure" (Quayson 2013: 205). The ethical dimension is activated by the oscillation of disability between complete abstraction, which is given by socially determined reactions, interpretative paradigms, etc., and actual circumstances, such as impairments (and the pain that derives from them), accessibility issues, etc. Its impossibility to be completely incorporated into the aesthetic level occurs because the former shows the relation of the latter to the real-life situation of disabled individuals. This does not mean that every portrayal should be understood instrumentally, but that these contribute to the

comprehension of the processes – and their repercussions – that produce the frameworks through which disability is interpreted in the actual world (Quayson 2013: 208).

The second is the analogy he drew between disability and the sublime. There are three features that he claimed they have in common. The first is that they both shape the understanding of the aesthetic domain. The second is that, while they resist entire comprehension, they both rely on language and narration as investigative tools. The last is their "inaugural status", that is to say, the fact that they both contribute to defining how representations function and interact with each other (Quayson 2013: 207). To explain the last point, Quayson referred to the definition of the sublime that Immanuel Kant provided in the *Critique of Judgement* (1790). In it, he explained that it concerns what cannot be organized and circumscribed and that it emerges from the conflict between reason and imagination because, even if it produces attempts to understand it and, thus, to depict it, it exceeds people's ability to do so (Kant 1790: 108 in Quayson 2013: 207). Disability shares with the sublime this ambiguous position regarding literary portrayals. However, what differentiates it is that this derives from and is reflected in the real world (Quayson 2013: 208).

Quayson's third theoretical influence is Mitchell and Snyder's "narrative prosthesis", particularly their concept that disability causes the open-endedness of texts to crumble. In their opinion, this happens solely on a nonaesthetic level since they believed it is provoked by the contrast between literary depictions and the way disability is perceived culturally. Even if he agreed with them on this, he affirmed that there are also "devices of aesthetic collapse that occur *within* the literary frameworks themselves" that merit consideration (Quayson 2013: 209). The principal one is precisely "aesthetic nervousness", which he defined as "what ensues and can be discerned in the suspension, collapse, or general short-circuiting of the hitherto dominant protocols of representation that may have governed the text" (Quayson 2013: 210). To perceive it, the author emphasized the importance of close reading as it is the sole tool through which it is possible to identify the elusive signs that make the text tumble (Quayson 2013: 212-213). Moreover, in addition to be what allows for the correlation between disability and the sublime (Quayson 2013: 210), "aesthetic nervousness" is also what causes the failure of the pragmatic function that Mitchell and Snyder assigned to disabled characters – their representing moral corruption and serving as a tool to evaluate the ethical value of the

able-bodied protagonists – and to the plot structure (Quayson 2013: 209) – I am referring to the stages of the "explanatory narrative" illustrated in the previous section which lead to the "prosthetization" or the elimination of the deviance.

The last author Quayson considered for developing his concept is Mikhail Bakhtin. Taking inspiration from his notion of the inherent dialogism of speech acts, which envisages the presence of an interlocutor even when one is not directly determined by the context of communication (Bakhtin in Quayson: 2013:212), Quayson formulated what he called "the structure of skeptical interlocution". This demonstrated that literary representations of disabled characters consistently raise doubts about their perceived and imagined realities, and that these are an integral part of their depiction, contributing to producing "aesthetic nervousness" (Quayson 2013: 212). The second is that examining all portrayals of disability within an author's body of work can deepen their understanding. In fact, orienting attention towards finding topical patterns between seemingly unrelated settings and characters shows how "aesthetic nervousness" works in each and across texts, allowing also for the establishment of links with other writers' works. For instance, in Shakespeare, atypical social states such as half-siblinghood and illegitimacy are seen as directly connected to assumed internal deviation and lack of morality. *Richard III*, the prime example when it comes to texts dealing with disability, *does* have a deformed protagonist, which raises and carries on the question of whether his impairment is the cause or the result of his evilness, but it centers as well on issues of brotherhood and envy. Therefore, to investigate the character of Richard III, both his illegitimacy and his deformity need to be taken into account (Quayson 2013: 210-211).

To conclude, in this section, I illustrated Quayson's "aesthetic nervousness" theory, resting particularly on the sources he took inspiration from. I recognize that encounters with disabled individuals may provoke discomfort in able-bodied because, being a person with a disability, I experience it firsthand. Moreover, I believe that, even if Quayson and the other authors mentioned have elaborated theoretical frameworks, it does not mean these necessarily correspond to their own approach to disability. However, I cannot overlook some problematic aspects that emerged. One of these is the fact that disability reminds people of the contingency of the universe and that it causes the dread of losing control over the body. Another is the fact that disability is compared to the sublime because they are both considered unfathomable concepts/experiences.

Personally, I see the fact that the existence of disabled people, their being in the world, is a phenomenon that other individuals have not only trouble understanding, but that also produces strong feelings, often too unsettling. Nonetheless, these are not the sole debatable elements that surfaced: the whole notion of “aesthetic nervousness” is questionable. In fact, literary representations of disability should provoke the same emotions as any other and not cause the collapse of texts. In this sense, life writing authored by people with disabilities is important. This will be investigated deeply in the next chapter.

3. Disability and Life-Writing: Exploring the Interplay of Self and Impairment

3.1. Beyond Autobiography: The Intricate Genre of Self-Life Writing

3.1.1. Mapping the Diverse Forms of Self-Life Writing

Before delving into the three texts that are the core of my dissertation, it is crucial to provide an overview of the genre to which they belong: life narratives. According to Lorraine Adams (2002), the practice of narrating one's life story traces back to the 4th century, when Augustine wrote his *Confessions*. Addressing God, he looked back on his existence through the lens of his religious conversion, reflecting on his mistakes and asking for forgiveness. This established a centuries-long tradition of engaging with spiritual introspection and cataloging of sins to justify the "vanity of writing about oneself" (Adams 2002: 46). With the Renaissance, memoirs evolved, moving away from their purely confessional nature and presenting a more multifaceted relationship with the divine. Nevertheless, the major shift occurred during the Enlightenment, when the movement's characteristic skepticism influenced the purpose and plot of life narratives, reducing the relationship with God to one among several concerns for the individual[17] (Adams 2002: 46-47). Moreover, it was in this period that "autobiography", the most common word associated with self-writing, arose[18]. Coming from the combination of the Greek words for "self" (*autos*), "life" (*bios*), and "writing" (*graphe*), the term "having never been used in earlier periods, appeared in the late eighteenth century in several forms, in isolated instances in the seventies, eighties, and nineties in both England and Germany with no sign that one use influenced another" (Folkenflik 1993: 5 quoted in Smith and Watson 2001: 2). Given the Enlightenment's emphasis on the self-interested, self-conscious, and self-aware individual, the emergence and growing audience of "autobiographies" was the logical outcome (Smith and Watson 2001: 2).

However, postmodern and postcolonial critiques of the Enlightenment subject have, over the last few years, led to the questioning of the concept of "autobiography".

[17] By the beginning of the 20th century, memoirs definitely removed the divine from their narratives (Adams 2002: 47).

[18] Prior to "autobiography", and apart from "confessions" that has already been mentioned, the practice of self-writing was referred to as "memoir", "the book of my life" or "the life (of)", and "essays of myself" (Smith and Watson 2001: 2).

Their scholars argue not only that what has been defined as "the highest achievement of individuality in western civilization" (Smith and Watson 2001: 3) did not account for the historical and geographical variety of genres of life narratives, but also that it was based on an exclusionary politics. As a matter of fact, what became its canon was the "narrative of the sovereign self" (Smith and Watson 2001: 3), which was founded on the implicit assumption that the other types of life writings which were produced at that time, such as slave narratives and narratives of women's experience within the household, were not as valuable and were not "real" autobiographies (Smith and Watson 2001: 3). This led to the identification, around three decades ago, of two other types of life-writing genres that are founded on the dynamics between a dominant and a subordinate group. The first is "(auto)ethnography". Mary Louise Pratt (1992) explained that "ethnographic works are a means by which Europeans represent to themselves their (usually subjugated) others" (Pratt 1992: 7 quoted in Couser 2009: 46). On the contrary, "autoethnographic texts are those the others construct in response to or in dialogue with those […] representations […] in ways that *engage with* the colonizer's own terms" (Pratt 1992: 7 quoted in Couser 2009: 46). When these deal with disability, they are centered on fighting against the objectifying labels of medical discourses and challenging the idea that standardized testing is a means to understand a person's subjectivity (Couser 2009: 46). The second genre is "testimonio". Defined by John Beverley (1992), it is "an affirmation of the individual subject, even of individual growth and transformation, but in connection with a group or class situation marked by marginalization, oppression, and struggle" (Beverley 1992: 103 quoted in Couser 2009: 46). It is precisely this link that differentiates it from "autobiography", and it might be expressed, for example, by advocating for a civil rights and liberation movement and by the fact that the author does not just speak for him/herself but for a whole minority (Couser 2009: 47).

Following the critiques of the notion of "autobiography", apart from "autoethnography" and "testimonio", there is another word that has gained a foothold, which indicates self-writing in general terms: memoir. In the past, it was used in the sense of *les mémoires*, which referred to the recollections of public figures about their achievements. Usually, these did not cover the entirety of their life, but just a significant period (Smith and Watson 2001: 3), accompanied by reflections on its importance to the author's existence. In current times, instead, it is seen as encompassing a historically and

culturally varied range of life-writing genres. However, I find it crucial to point out that, in the book *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (2001), which is one of the principal sources for this chapter, Watson and Smith withdrew from using this term[19]. At the same time, they claimed to have resorted to "autobiography" only to indicate retrospective life narratives as understood in Western tradition[20]. In fact, they preferred two other expressions, which they regarded as comprehensive of the heterogeneous variety of (self-)referential practices: "life writing" and "life narrative". Including in itself "autobiography" and "memoir", the former indicates the writing that has as its subject a life, the author's – in which case it is described as "self-life writing" – or someone else's. The latter, instead, refers to any form that the telling of a person's life can take, regardless of the media employed (Smith and Watson 2001: 4).

Adding to the already multifaceted landscape, there are further distinctions to consider when life narratives are centered on disability. These have primarily been proposed by G. T. Couser in his book *Signifying Bodies: Disability in Contemporary Life Writing* (2009), which also serves as a key source for this chapter. His starting point was Lorraine Adams's article "Almost Famous: The Rise of the 'Nobody' Memoir" (2002). Published in the wake of the "memoir boom", which began at the end of the twentieth century, that essay discussed the increasing popularity of "nobody memoirs", which are written by individuals who become famous *thanks to* the publication of their works, paralleling the process that first-time novelists must undergo (Adams 2002: 43). Its authors are typically young (in most cases, they have not reached the age of forty) and highly educated (they often graduated from a Master of Fine Arts in creative writing) women. "Nobody memoirs" are the counterpart of "somebody memoirs", which are written by well-known figures who compose them as a consequence of their notoriety. Because of this, these texts benefit from a pre-existing audience (Couser 2009: 2).

Adams (2002) argued that the memoirs that belong to the category of "nobody memoirs" can be further divided into three groups. The first, which is also the most numerous, is the "childhood memoir". This primarily includes stories of abuse, incest,

[19] Even Couser expressed his reservations about the word "memoir". As a matter of fact, he described it as "confusing" precisely because it includes both "self-biography" – in which case it is often used with a first-person pronoun and occasionally in the plural, resulting in "my memoir(s)" – and "biography" – in which case it is commonly accompanied by the preposition "of" (Couser 2009: 11).

[20] Nevertheless, they *did* frequently employ the adjective "autobiographical" to describe self-referential writing (Smith and Watson 2001: 4).

and impoverishment; only rarely are they accounts of "normality" or from a privileged position. The second group is the "memoir of physical catastrophe" and deals with violence, death, and physical disability. The third, which is the smallest, is the "memoir of mental catastrophe" and encompasses tales of addiction and alcoholism, madness, anorexia, and mental impairments (Adams 2002: 43). Drawing on this distinction, Couser pointed out how two out of three of Adams' categories concern disability and that, therefore, even if it is never recognized in this way, the "memoir boom" has also been a "boom" in disability life writing. This led him to claim that the "nobody memoir is also often the memoir of *some body*" since it "is often about what it's like to have or to *be*, to live in or *as*, a particular body […] a body that is usually odd or anomalous" (Couser 2009: 2). This also involves, though less frequently, focusing on the experience of knowing, loving, or living with someone that has this type of corporeality. The technical term for this last type of narrative is "somatography", while the one for the former is "autosomatography", and for the two together is "auto/somatography" (Couser 2009: 2). Before the "memoir boom", life narratives centered on the body were written by movie or sports stars, frequently with the help of a collaborator. Apart from the fact that they actually belonged to the category of the "somebody" memoir, these texts contributed to spreading the idea that surpassing physical standards was the way to becoming an icon, since their authors embodied notions of physical beauty and fitness and were what people with disabilities indicate as "severely able-bodied" (Couser 2009: 3). The increasing publication and success of memoirs by unknown individuals with anomalous bodies plays a part in questioning this underlying message of the "somebody" memoirs and culture in general. Moreover, they have significantly contributed to the expansion of disability authorship (Couser 2009: 3).

"Auto/somatographies" can be divided into two categories. The first includes a few conditions, such as blindness, deafness, breast cancer, HIV/AIDS, and – lately – depression, which have been at the center of numerous works. Explaining why these recur so frequently is not a straightforward process. In fact, these are neither the most dangerous nor the deadliest, nor the most common – diabetes or heart disease, for example, are at the core of a limited number of texts. Other factors need to be taken into account (Couser 2018: 202). One of these is the connection of some of these impairments to the development of a movement for civil rights. For example, breast cancer narratives became

popular in the ‘80s simultaneously with the emergence of the women’s rights movement and their claim for control over their bodies. A similar parallelism can be identified in what concerns narratives of heterosexual lives, in general, and of HIV/AIDS, in particular, and the gay rights movement. Couser emphasized that there is a correlation also between the prominence of writings about conditions like paralysis and the disability rights movement. As far as depression and autism are concerned, the reason for their popularity cannot be found in their being a separate minority or having a political agenda, but in their becoming, respectively, the mental illness and the developmental disability par excellence. Particularly, narratives regarding autism, which were initially written mainly by a parent or a sibling, have become so widespread that their own generic term has been coined: “autie-biography” (Couser 2009: 4-5). In this suggested framework, although it does not concern a single condition, the last type of “auto/somatography” of this group, and that I deem important to mention, is what Couser has defined as “auto/genography” (Couser 2009: 6). Following recent scientific advancements that have resulted in the development of more precise tests for the risks of hereditary conditions, this type of life narrative investigates how these can be passed on through generations and is propelled by the hope that the chain of inheritance would break at some point (Couser 2009: 6). The second category concerns several (rare) conditions that have prompted the creation of a reduced quantity of memoirs each. This increase in the number of impairments represented is due not only to the assumption that, nowadays, being affected by one is sufficient to have the right to produce an autobiography, but also to the affordability and increasing reputation of self-publishing and to the expansion of the internet (Couser 2018: 202-203). These interconnected factors have all contributed to empowering people with lesser-known and politically important conditions to author and share their stories, leading to a broader inclusion of perspectives within the genre.

3.1.2. Reading Life Writing: The Complex Issue of Truth

Although frequently reduced to a first-person account of one’s own existence, self-life writing possesses a more complex interplay of characteristics. First, it is not exclusively limited to the first person; the second or the third can also be used. Moreover, the plural can be employed if the subject talks about themselves as a community component. Secondly, its author functions as both the subject and the object of the narrative (Smith

and Watson 2010: 5). This happens because, when s/he is writing, s/he "confronts not one life but two. One is the self that others see […] but there is also the self experienced only by that person, the self felt from the inside that the writer can never get 'outside of'" (Smith and Watson 2010: 6). Thirdly, the text must be anchored in the writer's cultural, geographical, and, especially, temporal context (Smith and Watson 2010: 11). In fact, even if self-life writing can extend over several years, it is bound to the individual's lifespan or, at the latest, can be published posthumously in its author's final form (Smith and Watson 2010: 6). This, however, does not imply that it is necessarily a "retrospective narrative in chronological order about the life lived to the point of its writing" (Smith and Watson 2010: 11). As a matter of fact, narrators can shift from one moment to another, they can return to the past, even precedent to their birth, and they can wonder about the future (Smith and Watson 2010: 11). Lastly, even if people tend to describe autobiographical works as nonfiction, these share some features with novels, such as a plot, dialogues, and a distinct setting. What actually distinguishes these two genres is the relationship to and the statements about the world they refer to. While fiction depicts "*a* world", (self-)life writing alludes to "*the* world" (Smith and Watson 2010: 9-10). Furthermore, autobiographies are characterized by a correspondence between the author and the narrator. This is explained by Philippe Lejeune in his essay "The Autobiographical Pact" (1989): "what defines autobiography for the one who is reading is above all a contract of identity that is sealed by the proper name. And this is true also for the one who is writing the text" (Lejeune 1989: 19 quoted in Smith and Watson 2010: 11). According to him, therefore, what identifies life narratives is that the writer's "vital statistics" (Lejeune 1989: 21 quoted in Smith and Watson 2010: 11), that is to say, their place and date of birth, are the same as those of the narrator. It is precisely when readers recognize that the individual who professes to be the author is the same person as the central figure of the narrative that they consider the text to be autobiographical (Smith and Watson 2010: 11).

Nonetheless, there are some cases where this idea – rooted in the Western tradition – is challenged (Smith 1993: 398). One such instance is when "cognitive, neurological, and physical impairments […] make it difficult or impossible for disabled people to speak for themselves, much less to represent themselves in print" (Couser 2018: 207), and they must resort to the help of assistive technology or a human collaborator to produce their

life narratives. Depending on what their impairment allows (Couser 2028: 207), this might entail an individual recounting their life orally and another in charge of listening, putting notes in order, writing cohesively, and editing (Smith 1993: 398). In other cases, like for Ruth Sienkiewicz-Mercer's *I Raise My Eyes to Say Yes* (1989), the process involved an advocate who asked the woman, affected by a severe form of cerebral palsy, questions to which she answered using word boards. The collaborator would successively draft the narrative and then give it to her because she could approve it (Couser 2018: 2017). Nevertheless, because several elements might be influenced by the helper's intervention, like the addition of explanatory information to fill in gaps, the inclusion of details regarding the social context, and the improvement of the (oral) narrative, several issues might result from this type of "partnership". Encompassing who the voice that is speaking belongs to, who has control over the narrative, and what its aim is, these are linked to power dynamics, which might be unequal if the subject of the story and the facilitator have distinct cultures, nationalities, races, classes, and – I would add – degrees of dis/abilities (Smith 1993: 399). This could lead to the collaborator imposing their own ideologies and flattening differences, constructing a subject with characteristics that adhere to their own or to Western traditions (Smith 1993: 401).

Notwithstanding this, Smith (1993) pointed out that it *is* possible to produce cooperative projects that empower the subject: control might be equally split, for example, giving them the responsibility of deciding the purpose of the story or establishing the style. Additionally, the facilitator might make their presence explicit (Smith 1993: 404) or, on the contrary, they might avoid editing the (oral) narration, maintaining its rhythm, straightforwardness, and the language used to preserve authenticity (Smith 1993: 400-401). Couser (2018), instead, argued that the validity of the life narrative should not be questioned if its subject has been able to read it and approve it, as Sienkiewicz-Mercer did with hers. According to him, it is unjust to put autobiographers with communication-related impairments through more intense examination than nondisabled authors, especially considering that public figures resort to the help of ghostwriters frequently and less transparently. Nevertheless, Couser specified that this does not mean that life writing about disability is exempt from ethical issues. Contrarily, disabled people are extremely susceptible to exploitation. One of the most obvious examples of this is the life narrative written by their parents, a genre that was

already popular before the "memoir boom" and that continues to be largely widespread. Even if their intention is usually honorable, since they aim to raise awareness, to value life despite impairment, or to advocate for political change, they often culminate in conveying the message that parenting a child with a disability is an awful experience. This is rendered even more problematic by their reliance on subjects who are disadvantaged also because of their age (Couser 2018: 207-208).

Since they might include information considered as "facts", autobiographies are frequently misunderstood as being a "historical record", a "factual history about a particular time, person, or event. [However,] to reduce autobiographical narration to facticity is to strip it of the densities of rhetorical, literary, ethical, political, and cultural dimensions" (Smith and Watson 2010: 13). In fact, what it actually does is "incorporating usable facts into subjective 'truth'" (Smith and Watson 2010: 13). This leads to the last crucial point concerning self-life writing: the question of truthfulness. Evidently, some details, like the author's place and date of birth, can be checked through external documentation (Smith and Watson 2010: 16), but the primary source for autobiographies – the writer's memories – are personal and cannot be verified (Smith and Watson 2010: 7). This implies that it is impossible to assess whether what is being said corresponds to the truth (Smith and Watson 2010: 16). However, as Stanley Fish put it, "autobiographers cannot lie because anything they say, however mendacious, is the truth about themselves, whether they know it or not" (Fish 1999: A19 quoted in Smith and Watson 2010: 15). I would define, therefore, "autobiographical truth" (Smith and Watson 2010: 15) as another pact between narrators and readers: the former, through their writing, asserts that the version of the story they are providing deserves to be trusted (Smith and Watson 2010: 7), whereas the latter takes for granted the existence of the writer and the validity of their individual experience and context. Hence, autobiographical truth "resides in the intersubjective exchange between narrator and reader aimed at producing a shared understanding of the meaning of a life" (Smith and Watson 2010: 16). Susan Egan coined the expression "mirror talk" to express this, explaining that it is its multidimensionality that prevent from having a unique truth (Egan 1999: 326 in Smith and Watson 2010: 16). This makes self-life writing an "intersubjective" genre that requires reading to shift "from assessing and verifying knowledge to observing processes of communicative exchange and understanding" (Smith and Watson 2010: 17).

Before concluding, I would like to mention another aspect related to the truthfulness of life narratives that comes into play when someone who finds themselves in the "other" position becomes an autobiographical subject. When this happens, they produce stories "in which they create themselves as subjects" (Smith 1993: 398), consciously or unconsciously dealing with the rules of inclusion and exclusion of the genre. These make them "culturally recognizable subjects" (Smith 1993: 404) and lock them "into certain forms of compulsory […] identity" (Smith 1993: 405), which they can adhere to or resist (Smith 1993: 404). In his book *Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography* (1990), Timothy Dow Adams argued that playing with the truth is a (implicit) way of carrying out the second option. He claimed that, "since autobiographical acts are acts of self-construction", misrepresentations are "indexes of the metaphors of subjectivity necessary to the autobiographer's understanding of him or herself" (Adams 1990 in Smith 1993 405-406). Another way of fighting back, which is not connected to the issue of truthfulness but that I deem as noteworthy, is what Françoise Lionnet, in her *Autobiographical Voices* (1989), calls "the art of the métis" (Lionnet 1989: 18). Drawing from the French colonial concept of "métissage" (Lionnet 1989: 2) – which refers to the "hybridization" that derived from miscegenation (Lionnet 1989: 9) – Lionnet defined this expression as "an aesthetics of the ruse that allows the weak to survive by escaping through duplicitous means the very system of power intent on destroying them" (Lionnet 1989: 18). This strategy also enables the formulation of new visions of the self and ways of thinking that go beyond established dichotomies (Lionnet 1989: 6). Writing is the most effective way to express this and create a diverse and varied future where differences are valued (Lionnet 1989: 27) because it allows for an "intertextual weaving or métissage of styles" (Lionnet 1989: 29). This questions the binary opposition on which discourses of gender and race – and, I would include, of able-bodiedness and disability – are founded, privileging "intermediary spaces where boundaries become effaced and […] categories collapse into each other" (Lionnet 1989: 18). It is specifically this that, according to Smith (1993), generated hybrid life narrative genres, such as autoethnography and testimonio, that challenged the Western notion of autobiography. This also fostered new traditions that connect autobiographers through shared identities and topics, allowing them to be seen and underscoring the importance of each individual's story within their genre of life writing (Smith 1993: 406-407).

To terminate, I would like to take into account the characteristics of contemporary readers of life narratives according to Smith and Watson (2010). On the one hand, in an era where the global marketization of narratives of suffering is a widespread phenomenon, they desire to take part in others' pain; on the other, they want authenticity and to empathise with others' identities (Smith and Watson 2010: 17). This results in the fact that they do not regard life writing as solely entertainment or a distraction anymore, but as a tool to gain wisdom and insights. Hence, they require their writers to recognize and reflect on what they learned, and it is this that, without excluding "the use of the found, the fabricated, the strategic, the consciously invented", becomes the "basis of both writerly tact and readerly trust" (Smith and Watson 2010: 18).

3.2. The Disability Memoir: Unfolding Different Embodiments

3.2.1. The Importance of Disabled Life-Writing

Although certain aspects have already been mentioned in the previous sections, it is indispensable to explore further when impaired individuals began engaging in self-life writing practices and why this is significant. According to Couser (2018), what "may constitute the first disability memoir in English" (Couser 2018: 200) is British Member of Parliament William Hay's *Deformity: An Essay*. Published in 1754, it aimed to counter a text, titled "Of Deformity", written approximately one hundred and fifty years before by Sir Francis Bacon (1612). Probably thinking about his hunchbacked cousin, Sir Bacon discussed deformity, which he saw as a physical characteristic that impacted a person's internal dimension. On the contrary, even if he admitted that he was often ridiculed because of his curved spine caused by smallpox, Hay's writing about his disability revealed that he derived a positive sense of identity from it. A few more autosomatographies appeared in the nineteenth century, primarily authored by people who had been institutionalized or suffered from mental illnesses. Their titles often included the duration of institutionalization, linking it to other types of forced confinement, like slavery and incarceration (Couser 2018: 200-201). According to disability feminist scholars like Sami Schalk (2018), the beginning of the twentieth century, instead, was characterized by the publication of the first autobiographies by women with disabilities, such as Helen Keller's series, which she composed at various

stages of her life (Schalk 2018: 177). Including her *The Story of My Life* (1903), *The World I Live In* (1908), and *My Religion* (1927), the collection noteworthily put the act of writing at the center, connecting it with challenging prejudices of dependency and weakness, and surmounting hurdles. As a matter of fact, she discussed her fight as a deafblind woman born in 1880s America to obtain the right to education, to learn Braille, and to express herself (Hall 2016: 131). The genre grew further after World War II when several veterans impaired during the conflict returned home and decided to write their stories. This expansion continued in the 1950s, when the peak in polio cases was accompanied by a proliferation of accounts on the condition to such an extent that it is likely to have been the first illness to establish its own sub-category of life writing (Couser 2013: 456-457).

The most significant turning point in the history of this literary form, however, occurred in the last two decades of the twentieth century: disabled people increasingly claimed control over their narratives, resulting in a widespread surge in the writing and publishing of their autobiographies, called the "memoir boom" (Couser 2013: 456-457). As has been explained, this was linked with civil rights movements: Hall (2016) mentioned the disability slogan "Nothing about us without us" to emphasize how this principle could also adhere to the notion of self-depiction as an empowering and call-to-action tool (Hall 2016: 133). Additionally, this also served her to highlight the shift from the idea of auto/biography as "the acme of independent, liberal, individual self-expression in literature" (Coogan 2007: 42 quoted in Hall 2016: 133) towards one that is centered on the acknowledgment of a shared identity (Hall 2016: 133). Nevertheless, the exponential rise in disability life writing can also be explained by two further factors. The first, identified by Couser (2013), was that a "disability renaissance" (Couser 2013: 457) was generally occurring across all forms of art and media. The second, pointed out by Hall (2016), was that the development of blogs, websites, YouTube videos, and social media platforms, through their wide-ranging and inexpensive nature, was providing all people who had been silenced with the chance to voice their experiences for the first time. The increasing popularity of online self-publishing, which avoided going through established publishing houses, and the creation of new genres, which combined several types of writing and language, have also contributed (Hall 2016: 10).

While these explanations account for the increasing engagement of disabled individuals in self-life writing practices at the end of the last century, it is equally crucial to acknowledge that this was accompanied by the audience's growing interest in reading their stories. When discussing why disability is so prominent in literary works, one of the reasons presented was that it "demands a story" (Bérubé 2005: 570 quoted in Hall 2016: 3), and that it is its "very unknowability that consolidates this need" (Mitchell and Snyder 2000: 6 quoted in Hall 2016: 3). According to Couser (2013), this request for an "explanatory narrative" is paralleled in everyday life: "entering new situations, or re-entering familiar ones, people with anomalous bodies are often called upon to account for them, sometimes quite explicitly" (Couser 2013: 457). That request also motivates able-bodied people to research narratives about living with a disability with the aim of being relieved from their discomfort (Couser 2013: 458) and the fear provoked by the awareness that disability is the only identity group that "members of the majority can join at any time" (Couser 2018: 203), by receiving a response that conform to a "cultural script" (Couser 2013: 458). In the case of individuals who have HIV/AIDS, for example, this involves admitting that the way they behaved caused the development of the condition, thus acknowledging that they have "brought it upon themselves" (Couser 2013: 458). This, nevertheless, means that "for people with many disabilities, culture inscribes narratives *on* their bodies" (Couser 2013: 458).

This shows why self-life writing can be particularly crucial for disabled individuals: it can be "an anti-colonial phenomenon" through which not only can they "counter their historical subjection by occupying the subject position" (Couser 2018: 458) but also challenge these "cultural scripts". Adopting a social model-oriented perspective, they can frame their individual story in the historical context, discussing how this, their everyday life, their relationships, and legislation changes contribute to forming a multifaceted sense of identity, which is not centered exclusively on their impairment and can be celebrated (Hall 2016: 132-133). Furthermore, because it would be written "from the inside" and entail self-representation, it can allow them to propel a reassessment of a certain condition, especially when this affects the ability to communicate or the cognitive sphere. On this matter, Couser (2018) emphasized that "the autobiographical act (can) model the agency and self-determination that the disability rights movement has fought for" (Couser 2018: 458). This can be even more true if an intersectional approach is

adopted: for instance, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson claimed that "feminist standpoint theory is most effective when grounded in life-writing"[21] (Garland-Thomson 2005: 1569 in Schalk 2018: 177) to argue for the investigation of disabled women's self-life narratives, especially because of the double perspective they offer.

Couser (2009), nonetheless, also addressed the arguments that can be advanced against literary representations of disability. Though he recognized that they apply to all types of narratives, he highlighted them to underscore that autobiographical texts are equally subject to such criticism. The first is that depicting a certain condition tends to individualize it, risking also solidifying assumptions. The second is that the cultural context also influences authors, including autobiographers, shaping their writing and limiting the subversive potential of the genre (Couser 2009: 47). Hall (2016) echoed Couser's (2009) point when she claimed that "life writing […] draw(s) on many of the same culturally resonant structures, predecessors and conventions as literary writing" (Hall 2016: 143). Couser (2009) demonstrated the validity of these critiques by discussing certain recurring problematic rhetorics for self-portraying disability, which will be presented in the next section. However, he further asserted that an increasing number of texts published after the "memoir boom" show evidence of improvement, attesting to and progressing the activism of the disability rights movement, and acknowledging that disability is shared with other individuals, and, at least partially, socially constructed (Couser 2009: 47-48). These innovative works are defined by Couser (2009) as "new disability memoirs" (Couser 2009: 164) and will be examined in greater detail in the following sub-chapter as well.

3.2.2. Self-Representing (Physical) Disability: Reinforcing and Subverting Narrative Patterns

Before investigating how (physical) disability is represented in self-life narratives, it is fundamental to take into account two aspects. The first, underscored by Smith and Watson (2010), regards the central position that the body holds within the genre, since it functions as both the source for and the locus of what is being narrated. The way it is depicted,

[21] Feminist standpoint theory is an approach that considers women and girls' experiences as fundamental sources of knowledge and, therefore, makes these its primary focus of attention (Garland-Thomson 2005: 1569 in Schalk 2018: 183).

therefore, must be analyzed, particularly focusing on how it engages with or questions the cultural rules that establish its use and its relationship with the surrounding environment, ultimately demonstrating how these are dictated by compulsory able-bodiedness (Smith and Watson 2010: 54). The second aspect that requires consideration is that, similarly to people belonging to other minorities, subjects with disabilities who have internalized society's prejudices and the subsequent devaluation that derives from them are less likely to engage in autobiographical practices because they regard their existence as not worthy of being narrated (Couser 2009: 32). Those that *do* decide to write their story often resort to conventional "rhetorics", which do not challenge the status quo but, on the contrary, reinforce assumptions and marginalization. Couser identified and explained these in his book *Signifying Bodies* (2009), which is the primary source for this section, specifying that he used the term "rhetoric" "somewhat loosely to characterize discursive patterns that combine imagery, plot, and theme. […] In the case of disability memoir", he analyzed these "to explore how they position a narrator (and his namesake protagonist) with regard to a topic (disability in some form) and in relation to an audience of readers" (Couser 2009: 33).

The first "discursive pattern" he described is the so-called "rhetoric of triumph", which can be found in narratives of overcoming. Its protagonist is a "supercrip"[22], who is proud of – and desires the readers' amazement for – having surmounted the hurdles presented by their impairment (Couser 2009: 33), by achieving something that is regarded as impossible for someone with their condition. Referred to by disabled individuals as "inspiration porn", these stories are problematic because they misrepresent reality, where triumph is an exception, rather than the standard. Moreover, they minimize society's role in disabling a person by conveying the idea that the recipe to succeed is "just" unflinching tenacity (Couser 2018: 203-204). It can be said, thus, that this pattern adheres to the medical model ideology by locating disability within the individual and presenting it as an issue to be conquered. Furthermore, it removes the stigma from the author, but not from all who share the same impairment, and it does not propel the audience to question the current state of affairs (Couser 2009: 34).

[22] Couser (2018) defined this word as "a disparaging term for disabled people who overcompensate for their supposed deficiencies" (Couser 2018: 203).

The second narrative framework is “the rhetoric of Gothic fiction”. Drawing its name from the genre that primarily features deformed and disfigured characters, it depicts disability as terrifying, evoking in readers, at best, pity, and, at worst, repulsion. Although it might appear contradictory for such a narrative to be written in the first person (Couser 2009: 34), the explanation for why an author charges their acquired condition with dread is that it happened in the past. Readers share with them the relief that the impairment has since been escaped, especially after their own fear of disability had been activated by the story (Couser 2018: 204-205). Even if this rhetoric commonly consolidates spread perceptions, Couser (2009) pointed out that there is an instance when it can have subversive power. This occurs when it does not terminate with the narrator’s recovery, and the source of horror is actually the treatment measures put in place, especially if these are applied to people who are wrongly considered as unconscious or with a too severe condition to be rehabilitated. Nevertheless, it is crucial to emphasize that even this more counterhegemonic pattern still employs a medical approach since “it does not challenge the idea that disability resides in the individual body” (Couser 2009: 35). A final aspect to consider is that “the rhetoric of Gothic fiction” shares with the “rhetoric of triumph” a focus on overcoming an impairment and with “narratives of restitution” its depiction of conditions being corrected or cured. Nevertheless, in the latter, the hero is not the narrator but the medical professional who has been able to work out the issue (Couser 2018: 205).

The situation becomes even more intricate when the author is affected by a permanent or progressive condition that cannot be surmounted or healed. The reason is that this seemingly precludes a happy ending, likely making life narratives less appealing to the public. This problem can be circumvented, however, by shifting the focus from the physical to the moral sphere, producing the “rhetoric of spiritual compensation”. Potentially including explicit religious language, if, on the one hand, this turns upside down the value typically assigned to the disabled body, making it a repository of grace instead of sin, on the other, it does not separate disability from morality, suggesting that it does need some form of reward (Couser 2018: 205). Consequently, like the preceding narratives, this one also does not view disability as a social or political issue but as an individual matter. In fact, the author, not the stigma itself, is removed from the negative connotations of the condition. Moreover, secular readers are likely to see the religious dimension not as a solution, but as inherent to the problem itself (Couser 2009: 37-38).

Another narrative framework employed by people affected by a permanent or progressive condition is the "rhetoric of nostalgia". Primarily adopted by individuals who have acquired their disability, this is characterized by not looking to the future, rooted in the acknowledgment that recovery is not possible. As a result, the self-life writing centers exclusively on fragmented recollections, all preceding the accident that caused, or the onset of, the impairment. The narrative arc, thus, is one of recession and the time as an able-bodied person regarded as more valuable. Readers do not feel sorry for the author; rather, they see him/her positively because, despite the circumstances, they have decided to recount enjoyable episodes. While this might make this pattern appear positive, it is precisely its problematic aspect because it reinforces the marked dichotomy between ability and disability. The impairment is not the subject of the text, but "just" what motivates the author to write it, contributing to and not questioning the negative perceptions of disability. Furthermore, because the narrator's aim is not to reclaim their position in society through their texts, no accessibility issue is addressed. Hence, even if doctors cannot frequently do more than stabilize the given situation, the medical model is not challenged (see Couser 2009: 38-42).

Turning to more counterhegemonic patterns, the first that Couser (2018) emphasized is the "coming out" narrative. Drawing on gay and lesbian autobiographical practices (Couser 2018: 206), thus underscoring another point of intersection between the two minorities (Hall 2016: 133), it focuses on "owning and affirming one's identity as a disabled person" (Couser 2018: 206). Traditionally, it is structured in two parts: the first of "private acceptance" and the second of "public acknowledgement" of belonging to a marginalized group (Couser 2009: 168). This second phase frequently entails also the reclamation of accommodations: coming out as disabled is an individual decision that requires active affirmation and selection, "but one that is far more appealing when there is cultural acceptance and legal protection" (Couser 2009: 169). Beyond providing additional evidence of the utility of self-life writings for activism (Hall 2016: 134), this aspect underscores how this narrative connects to the civil rights movement, which fostered openness about one's way of being by asserting that people with disabilities deserved equal treatment as nondisabled (Couser 2018: 206). Similarly, Hall (2016) argued that claiming a disability identity also possesses a collective dimension, as it involves recognizing being a part of and engaging with a minority group (Hall 2016: 135)

and encouraging other impaired individuals to do the same. There are two further benefits of this pattern that are worth mentioning: the first is that, because it is principally employed by individuals who have an invisible or easily concealable impairment, the publication of these stories challenges the stark distinction and the dynamics between disabled and able-bodied individuals, making the latter realize they are already effortlessly coexisting and stop the process of othering. The second is that, "contrary to narrative patterns that remove stigma from the individual while leaving it in place for the condition, the coming-out story […] exposes the arbitrariness of the stigma by affirming the condition that it is attached to" (Couser 2018: 206). To conclude this discussion, I deem it important to highlight two further points. Firstly, this rhetoric aligns with conversion narratives in its adoption of a retrospective point of view marked by a strong and "sudden change of perspective", which altered the perception of the impairment (Couser 2009: 168) and led to the feeling that the time before coming out was wasted because it was not fully lived (Couser 2009: 171). The second is that, according to Hall (2016), despite all the positive sides, this pattern might be regarded as oppressive if it is used by impaired individuals because they have been forced to answer for their body in a way that able-bodied people do not need to (Hall 2016: 134). This, I would argue, further supports the argument presented in the previous sections that disability demands an "explanatory narrative".

The second subversive rhetoric described by Couser (2009) is the "narrative of emancipation" (Couser 2009: 44). Generally characterized by a literal coming out, such as through deinstitutionalization, rather than a figurative one, this type of story is closely connected to slave narratives for several reasons. The first is its engagement with inequality and the desire for freedom, rooted in the principle that having an impairment does not legitimize injustice and confinement (Couser 2018: 206-207). The second is that it underscores that the othering and subsequent isolation of individuals are cultural phenomena, not inevitable or "natural" outcomes. The third is that it is abolitionist in its advocacy for ending the institutionalization (or, I would argue, discrimination in general) of disabled people, and this is the result of a social movement. The author's political awareness usually emerges from their interaction with people who experience similar situations and are affected by the same impairment: it is precisely his/her identification with them that propels the narrator to assume a more powerful stance of personal agency.

Evidently, this does not mean the impairment is overcome, but that a way through it is found, by getting society to accommodate it by removing the hurdles – be they physical or cultural – to integration (see Couser 2009: 43-45). Herein lies the counterhegemonic power of this pattern: in its conceptualization of disability not as an (exclusively) intrinsic bodily problem but as a social construct (Couser 2009: 47).

The two counterhegemonic narratives that have just been described are commonly found in what Couser (2009) called "new disability memoirs"[23]. Started to be published in the late 1990s, their innovation is not in their form but in their content: they all showcase disability consciousness (Couser 2009: 164-165). In fact, even when they are not "coming out narratives", their authors choose to live openly as disabled, hence asserting their identity and rights (Couser 2009: 171). Additionally, drawing on the foundational distinction of the social model, they focus on disability rather than impairment[24] (Couser 2009: 165). This also implies that they refer to the progress of disability rights legislations and draw upon it to advocate for better accommodations of their needs, stating that these are legally mandated (Couser 2009: 169). Related to this, they showcase a deep "sense of historicity" (Couser 2009: 189). This is expressed through a (retrospective) acknowledgement of the extent to which the lives of people with disabilities have changed and are changing thanks to their activism and agency. This makes most of these life-narratives perform advocacy explicitly (Couser 2009: 189). Even if they conceptualize disability as contextually dependent, however, this does not mean that the term is employed with a negative connotation. In fact, they use it to assert it as a positive identity that makes them a part of a large minority – a community – characterized by the fact that social restrictions are imposed on its members (Couser 2009: 186). Together with inviting other people who are in the same situation to engage in self-life writing practices, this makes these texts move beyond the inherent individualism of autobiographical tellings (Couser 2009: 177-178). Lastly, the writers of the "new disability memoirs" demonstrate an awareness of the problems that representing disability usually imply, such as the risk of resorting to the typical prejudicial patterns employed in

[23] I would like to point out that, originally, Couser defined these subversive self-life writing texts "robust disability narratives", which he described as "first-person narrative acts that refuse cultural pressure to treat disability as an adversity to be overcome or an embarrassment requiring apology" (Couser 2004: 164 in Mintz 2007: 9).

[24] According to Couser (2009), this, nonetheless, should come as no surprise since most of the writers have worked in the disability studies field (Couser 2009: 165).

memoirs (and, I would add, in all the other literary forms), and deliberately deviate from them (Couser 2009: 172).

4. The Paralympic Movement

4.1. History of the Paralympic Games

Given that the three self-life narratives that are at the core of this thesis have all been written by Paralympic athletes, it is fundamental, before proceeding to their analysis, to delve into "the second largest multi-sport event on the planet" (Brittain 2018: 125): the Paralympic Games. Their founder is Dr. Ludwig Guttmann, a neurosurgeon and neurologist, who was establishing his career in 1930s Germany, when Hitler ascended to power and impeded all Jewish academics from working in mainstream universities and hospitals. After a short period as the head of the Breslau Jewish hospital (Bonhôte and Ettedgui 2020, 29:40 to 31:00), in 1939, he moved to England with his family and settled in Oxford (Brittain 2018: 126). At that time, veterans who came back from the war with a spinal cord injury would die within six months of infection. Therefore, when the Spinal Injuries Center was opened at Stoke Mandeville, England, nobody wanted to take charge of it because patients were regarded as facing a supposedly hopeless situation. Yet, when the position was offered to Dr. Guttmann, he promptly accepted it, underscored by his conviction that "paraplegia is not the end of the way. It is the beginning of a new life" (Guttmann in Bonhôte and Ettedgui 2020, 43:42). A pivotal aspect of his treatment involved turning patients every two hours, thereby preventing the formation of pressure sores that were a major cause of infection. As a result, more individuals survived and required rehabilitation into society, leading to Dr. Guttmann's second significant intuition: the inclusion of sport in this process. The enthusiasm with which this was accepted fueled the development of a sports movement and the creation of the Stoke Mandeville Games. Their first edition was held on the 29th of July 1948, the same day as the Opening Ceremony of the London Olympic Games[25], and featured sixteen paralyzed ex-servicemen competing (Bonhôte and Ettedgui 2020, 42:12 to 45:50) in archery. The crucial advantage of this discipline was that, once mastered, it enabled people with disabilities to compete equally with non-disabled individuals and access their archery

[25] According to Landy (1992), the choice of this date for the Stoke Mandeville Games signaled that "the sports movement for disabled people was bound from the start to converge on the sports movement for the able-bodied". In Landy's opinion, this aligned with Dr. Guttmann's own "rather astonishing claim that the Stoke Mandeville Games would one day become recognized as the paraplegic equivalent of the Olympic Games" (Landy 1992: 1 in Legg 2018: 152).

clubs. These also proved to be a means for social reintegration – the ultimate aim of Guttmann's innovative approach – once they left the hospital (Brittain 2018: 127).

For the first four years, the Stoke Mandeville Games were a national competition, attracting an increasing number of British spinal units. A significant turning point occurred in 1952, when the participation of four Dutch veterans made them an international event. This new dimension fueled the Games' continued development throughout the 1950s, with growth in the array of sports and events, and in the number of participating nations (Brittain 2018: 127-128). Because of this, in May 1959, at the World Veterans Federation's meeting in Rome, Dr. Guttmann decided with its representatives, those of the Istituto Nazionale per l'Assicurazione contro gli Infortuni sul Lavoro (National Institute for Insurance against Accidents at Work) (INAIL), and with Dr. Antonio Maglio, Director of the Spinal Center in Ostia, to conduct an "experiment" and held the 1960 edition of the International Stoke Mandeville Games in the same city as, and a few weeks after, the Olympic Games. Furthermore, they established that, if the test in Rome proved successful, the International Stoke Mandeville Games would be organized, where feasible, in the same place and in the same year as the Olympics and in Stoke Mandeville in the years in between[26] (Brittain 2018: 131). Nevertheless, beyond Rome, in the subsequent six editions of the Olympic Games, this alignment only occurred in Tokyo in 1964. In fact, in 1972 and 1976, what would become the Paralympics were held in the same country as their counterpart (Germany and Canada, respectively) but in different cities, while in 1968, 1980, and 1984, political or logistical issues led them to be hosted in completely different countries (Legg 2018: 153). For example, Russia refused to host the "disabled Olympics" in 1980 (Bonhôte and Ettedgui 2020, 59:32), allegedly to avoid acknowledging the presence of people with disabilities within its borders. Luckily, the Netherlands intervened, and the Games took place in Arnhem (Bonhôte and Ettedgui 2020, 59:44 to 1:00:14)

It is also important to point out that, through 1972, participation in the Games was limited to athletes with spinal cord injuries. Yet, from the preceding decade onward, the need to organize international sports competitions for other impairment groups began to

[26] This continued to be the practice until the early 1990s, when the International Stoke Mandeville Games stopped occurring (Brittain 2018: 131).

be felt[27]. In 1964, this led to the foundation of the International Sports Organisation for the Disabled (ISOD), with Dr Guttmann becoming its president a couple of years later. As he was also at the head of the International Stoke Mandeville Games Federation (ISMGF), this dual leadership further contributed to bringing all disability groups together in one Games. Indeed, the Paralympics in Toronto (1976) saw the inclusion of amputee, blind, and visually impaired athletes, followed by individuals with cerebral palsy in Arnhem (1980), and "Les Autres" (that is to say, "the others") in New York (1984). This also resulted in the introduction of disciplines specifically designed for a certain condition, such as goalball and boccia. Technological progress, like the development of prosthetics and the evolution of specialized wheelchairs, also expanded the variety of sports and improved existing ones. For example, while wheelchair racing was already established, sport-specific wheelchairs made their debut in Toronto (see Brittain 2018: 132-135). The year 1976 was also marked by the first edition of the Winter Paralympic Games, which were held in Sweden. Called "the Winter Olympics for the Disabled" (Legg 2018: 153), they were proposed at the ISOD's annual general meeting in 1974. Initially featuring only athletes with visual disability and amputations, they broadened to include people affected by spinal cord injuries in 1980, and those with cerebral palsy in 1984 (Brittain 2018: 134). As for the Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games, the tradition of both Winter Games being held in the same city began later. In this case, it started in 1992 at Albertville, France (Legg 2018: 153). It is fundamental to point out also that, mirroring the IOC's decision to hold the Winter Olympics two years after the Summer Games, the successive Winter Paralympics were held in 1994 in Lillehammer, Norway (National Paralympic Heritage Trust n.d.).

While the establishment of the ISOD was crucial for the advancements outlined, the gradual emergence of separate organizations from it between the 1970s and the 1980s gave rise to questions about its purpose. This led the representatives of the ISMGF, the ISOD, the International Blind Sports Association (IBSA), and the Cerebral Palsied−International Sports and Recreation Association (CP-ISRA) to agree, on 11 March 1982, that these organizations should form a co-operative committee, which was named the International Co-ordinating Committee (ICC) six months later. In 1987, discussions

[27] For instance, in 1964, the British Limbless Ex-Servicemen's Association (BLESMA) organized, at Stoke Mandeville, the first international sport event for amputees (Brittain 2018: 133).

began to include also national, regional, and athlete representation. Several meetings were needed to reach a consensus on the structure of the body intended to replace the ICC. It was only at the General Assembly, held in Dusseldorf, Germany, on 21st and 22nd September 1989, that the final approval was given, resulting in the foundation of the International Paralympic Committee (IPC), which continues to lead the Paralympic Movement and develop the Games to the present day (see Brittain 2018: 135-137).

Building on the progress that led to the IPC, the 1988 Summer Paralympics in Seoul marked yet another pivotal moment, so much so that Legg (2018) claimed they "signalled the start of the 'modern era' of the Paralympic Games" (Legg 2018: 153). This is due to three main reasons. The first is that the term "Paralympics" was officially adopted[28] (Legg 2018: 153). Coined from a combination of the Greek preposition "para" (which means "beside" or "alongside") and "Olympic", it intended to suggest that the Paralympic Games are parallel to the Olympics (International Paralympic Committee n.d.b.). This, I would argue, aligns with Guttmann's aspiration for the disability sports movement to be considered equal to that of able-bodied individuals. The second is that the Organizing Committee's effort to not only host both the Olympic and Paralympic Games, but also to have similar opening ceremonies, use similar venues, and offer the same experience to all the athletes, definitely established the practice to hold both competitions in the same place a few weeks one after the other (Legg 2018: 153). The third is that the Paralympic logo was created. Initially, it featured five Tae-Geuk – a Korean symbol representing "the ultimate reality from which all things and values originate" (International Paralympic Committee n.d.c.) – similar in colors and configuration to the Olympic Rings. Nevertheless, due to this very resemblance, in 1994, a different version with just three Tae-Geuk was designed. Accompanied by the motto "Mind, Body, Spirit", this was used until the Closing Ceremony in Athens (2004), when it was replaced by the one employed to this day. Called the "Agitos" (meaning "I move" in Latin), it is composed of three elements in red, blue, and green, the colors most frequently appearing in national flags. These encircle a central point, representing motion, and highlight the role of the Paralympic Movement in reuniting athletes from across the globe "to compete and achieve sporting excellence" (International Paralympic Committee

[28] Until then, the Games' title varied for every edition. For instance, those held in 1976 were called the "Torontolympiad for the Physically Disabled" (Legg 2018: 153).

n.d.c.). This logo, which was paired with a new motto, "Spirit in Motion", was restyled in 2019 to unify its components and enhance the spacing and the geometry. The colors were also updated to match the red, blue, and green used in the Olympic Rings (International Paralympic Committee n.d.c.).

The establishment of the IPC paved the way, in the mid- to late 1990s, for greater cooperation between the disability sport movement and the International Olympic Committee (IOC). Firstly, the founding President of the IPC, Dr. Robert Steadward, was one of only twelve individuals outside the IOC appointed to its Commission on Ethics and Reform. Secondly, not only was Dr. Steadward elected as an IOC member during the IOC Session held at the 2000 Sydney Games, but this laid the groundwork for the signing of a framework agreement between him and the then-IOC President Juan Antonio Samaranch[29]. This stipulated IPC representation in IOC commissions and financial support for the former from the latter. Evolving from this, another joint pact was set forth the following year, "outlining a joint bid process to officially begin with the 2008 summer Games Bid" (Brittain 2018: 140). Described as the first "Games Cooperation Agreement" (Legg 2018: 161), this established that, from the 2008 Beijing Games, any city that submitted its candidacy to host the Olympics was also obliged to bid for the Paralympics. In fact, although all cities, from the 1988 edition, had indeed organized both events, this was due to the precedent set by Seoul rather than a formal regulation (Brittain 2018: 140). Furthermore, the pact decreed that there would be a common Organizing Committee, that the Paralympics would be reserved "similar principles and standards as the Olympic Games" (Legg 2018: 161-162), and their budget would be integrated within that of the latter (Legg 2018: 162).

While the increasingly close relationship between the IOC and the IPC contributed to a shift in understanding – moving away from the idea that the Paralympic Games were solely about raising awareness towards the recognition that they, similarly to the Olympics, are about elite sport – the agreements also subjected the IPC to constraints, with the IOC gaining control over its activities (Brittain 2018: 140-141). In fact, on the one hand, the 2010 Vancouver Games saw the term "Paralympic" added to the official name of the Olympic Organizing Committee, and the flags of both movements flapped

[29] It is crucial to note that an amendment to this agreement, introduced in 2002, established automatic IOC membership for all IPC Presidents (Legg 2018: 161).

next to each other at the competition and support venues, as well as the Olympic and Paralympic Village. Furthermore, for the 2012 London Games, a single logo – differentiated solely by the presence of either the Olympic Rings or the "Agitos" – and a duo of mascots – named Wenlock and Mandeville to honor the two English towns that are the heart of the British Olympic and Paralympic Movements, respectively – were adopted (Legg 2018: 162-163).

On the other hand, the downsides of the IPC's financial ties to the IOC became apparent in the lead-up to the 2016 Rio Games. Indeed, a few weeks before the Olympic Opening Ceremony, on July the 18th (Bonhôte and Ettedgui 2020, 1:11:26 to 1:11:44), Andrew Parsons, the then-President of the Brazilian Paralympic Committee[30] (International Olympic Committee n.d.), was informed by the Organizing Committee of a funding shortfall – the result of all money being spent on the Olympics – that would not only terribly impact the Paralympics' delivery but could potentially prevent them from taking place (Parsons in Bonhôte and Ettedgui 2020, 1:11:48 to 1:12:05). Parsons together with IPC's then-president Sir Philip Craven and Xavi Gonzalez, the IPC's Chief Executive Officer between 2004 and 2019, tried to find out a solution and successfully convinced the Brazilian government to sponsor the Games. However, a Federal Judge moved for an injunction against it due to the President's impeachment, ordering that the money could not be transferred unless the Organizing Committee disclosed its financial records, which it refused. Parsons himself went to speak to the Judge, who, after twenty-four hours from the meeting and just three weeks before the Paralympics were supposed to begin, agreed to give them the fund (Bonhôte and Ettedgui 2020, 1:14:45 to 1:19:28). The challenges, unfortunately, had not yet ended. As a matter of fact, the Organizing Committee had sold fewer Paralympic tickets than in any previous Games (Bonhôte and Ettedgui 2020, 1:21:22 to 1:21:35). Nonetheless, once the athletes became the focal point and the public discovered the Games, the ticket sales rose to such an extent that the highest number of people that accessed the competition venues was during the Paralympics and not the Olympics (Bonhôte and Ettedgui 2020, 1:24:44 to 1:25:38).

Although the challenges were successfully overcome, what happened in Rio in 2016 fueled the debate on the IPC's potential detachment from the IOC and autonomous

[30] Andrew Parsons held this position from 2009 until becoming the IPC's President in 2017, a role he took on after already serving as its vice-President from 2013 (International Olympic Committee n.d.).

organization of its Games. However, such a move would entail considerable risks because, even if the Paralympics have significantly increased as a brand in the past three decades, their value is still lower than that of the Olympics. This disparity is likely due to the latter's longer history and the former's achievement of financial success only following the 1984 Games held in Los Angeles (Legg 2018: 164). Furthermore, discussions surfaced on whether the two Games should be merged or continue to be separated. On the one hand, including athletes with disability as equal members in the Olympic Family would align with Olympic ideals. Moreover, the Paralympics would benefit from the audience's support for the Olympics. On the other hand, not only would there be logistical challenges, like hosting a greater number of athletes and the long duration that such an event would have, but also the hard-won force the Paralympic Games gained in the past two decades would diminish. Additionally, such unification would jeopardize both events and likely result in lower athlete participation, thus reducing the competitive opportunities for people with disabilities. Holding the Paralympics before the Olympics would also be disadvantageous, as their current scheduling allows them to leverage solutions to issues encountered during the Olympic Games (see Legg 2018: 165-168). Personally, I believe the two events should remain separate, especially because, as Andrew Parsons stated, "the Paralympic Games is […] the only global event of impact that puts persons with disabilities front and centre" (Parsons in International Paralympic Committee 2023).

It should also be noted that an attempt to integrate, to some extent, the two Games has already been made. In fact, in 1982, the IOC and the ICC agreed that the former "would host two demonstration status events for athletes with a disability beginning at the 1984 Summer and Winter Olympic Games" (Legg and Steadward 2011 in Legg 2018: 154), which would be held in Los Angeles and Sarajevo, respectively. The disciplines selected for the Winter Olympics (which included demonstration events up to the 1992 edition) were para-alpine and para-nordic skiing for visually impaired athletes, whereas the Summer Games featured wheelchair track racing. The issue with these competitions laid in the non-recognition of disabled athletes as official team members and the exclusion of their medals from national team rankings. This led Paralympic leaders to fight for full medal status for these events, arguing that this practice conveyed a message of difference instead of one of acceptance and legitimacy, and that it violated the IOC's Charter of

Rights, which prohibited all forms of discrimination. After a few years of negotiation between what had become the IPC and the IOC, however, the request was rejected by the IOC. The reasons for this decision remain obscure, as it is still unclear why the demonstration events at the 2004 Athens Games were the last (see Legg 2018: 154-158).

The lines between the Games have also been blurred when athletes with disabilities have competed against able-bodied at the Olympics. The most notable case is Oscar Pistorius, a South African double-leg amputee, who participated in track events both at the Olympics and the Paralympics in 2012[31]. Nonetheless, he is not the only athlete to have achieved this: George Eyser, an American gymnast, was the first to do so at the 1904 St Louis Games, and after him, there has been Natalie du Toit in swimming, Natalia Partyka in table tennis, Jim Abbott in baseball and Marla Runyon in athletics, among others. However, these situations generate controversy over whether the disabled individual has an unfair advantage over their able-bodied competitors and prompt questions such as whether the athlete with disabilities should be allowed to compete in both Games, or if participating in the Olympics should exclude them from the Paralympics. This last scenario would present downsides for the Paralympic Movement, which would lose its prestige and its most renowned athletes and competitions. It is also important to consider that not only is Olympic participation for Paralympic athletes limited to those with milder disabilities, while those with more severe impairments are excluded (Legg 2018: 159-160), but also that this conveys the idea that the former, who are the minority, represent the totality of the disability sport community (Dandy 1993: 359 in Legg 2018: 161).

What is certain is that the Paralympic Movement is actively working to reinforce its identity. For instance, in October 2023, it was "announced that Stoke Mandeville, the birthplace of Paralympic sport, will be where the Paralympic Flame will be created ahead of each Paralympic Torch Relay from the Paris 2024 Paralympic Games onwards" (International Paralympic Committee 2023). Aiming to increase awareness of the role Stoke Mandeville and Dr. Ludwig Guttmann had in the development of the Movement, this decision broke the prior tradition of the Flame being created in the host country, a practice that meant that Stoke Mandeville represented the start of the Torch Relay only

[31] I will discuss Oscar Pistorius' case more thoroughly in the next chapter, when I will analyze his self-life writing *Blade Runner* (2012).

for the 2012 London Games. However, the city's ignition of a "Heritage Flame" that would be merged with that of the country where the Games were held – a tradition begun with the 2014 Sochi Winter Paralympics – had already been a step in this direction (International Paralympic Committee 2023).

4.2. Gender Disparities and/at the Paralympics

Building on the historical overview of the Paralympic Movement, the next crucial step is to examine the role of women within it, especially since two self-life writings that will be analyzed in the next chapter were composed by female authors. Globally, over one billion people live with disabilities, with research showing a higher prevalence among girls and women, potentially attributable to their longer lifespans and the associated increase in age-related conditions. Yet, they continue to be underrepresented in all aspects of parasport (Dean et al. 2022: 221). This imbalance was evident from the inaugural edition of the Stoke Mandeville Games in 1948, where only two of the 16 competing wheelchair archers were women: Robin Imray and Joan "Bunty" Noon. This was paralleled in the leadership structure where only one woman, Joan Scruton, held a significant position during the early years. Initially hired as Guttmann's assistant at the Stoke Mandeville Hospital, she actively collaborated in the first few Games, even handling tasks such as scorekeeping. Moreover, she was an official organizing member from 1952 to 1968 and secretary general of the ISMGF from 1975 to 1982 (AMP Media 2024).

Despite the fact that, in 1976, an UNESCO conference upheld the right of disabled individuals, male *and* female alike, to access physical education and sport (DePauw 1999: 51), a marked gender disparity in the participants persisted and remains observable in all editions of the Paralympics. Nevertheless, encouragingly, since 1988, the ratio of female athletes has been continually increasing (Ogoura 2022: 130). In fact, while the rate hovered around 25% between the 1980s and 1990s, it climbed to between 34% and 39% in the Games held from 2004 to 2016 (Forber-Pratt 2018: 39). In the last two editions, this percentage continued to rise. At Tokyo 2020, out of 4,393 athletes, 1,846 were women (42%), a record subsequently broken at Paris 2024, where women were 1,983 out of 4,400, representing thus 45% of athletes. Furthermore, in a couple of disciplines, women even outnumbered men: in Para powerlifting, 90 women took part in the competition compared to 89 men, while in Para Equestrian, there were 61 women as opposed to 17

men. Additionally, Para badminton, Para rowing, Wheelchair basketball, and Goalball had complete parity (International Olympic Committee 2024).

In my view, the Winter Paralympic Games present a less promising picture. As a matter of fact, in the last four editions (2010 Vancouver, 2014 Sochi, 2018 PyeongChang, and 2022 Beijing), women's participation consistently remained below 25% (Forber-Pratt 2018: 39 and International Paralympic Committee 2022). What I found even more striking, however, were two other aspects. The first is that Andrew Parsons claimed that "the number of female Para athletes [had] grown tremendously" (Andrew Parsons in International Paralympic Committee 2022), while there were actually just five more women in Beijing in 2022 than in the 2018 PyeongChang. The second is that, in 2022, the disparity was significant even for countries like France (2 women out of 15 athletes), Great Britain (5 women out of 21 athletes), and Italy (2 women out of 29 athletes). Among the largest European nations, only Germany achieved gender parity with 9 male and 9 female athletes (International Paralympic Committee 2022). This demonstrates that female participation rates are not necessarily a direct consequence of a nation's economic standing (Ogoura 2022: 131). Nonetheless, Dean et al. (2022) argue that opportunities are scarcer in developing countries compared to nations with more resources. This is evidenced by the fact that the latter's teams tend to be larger, include more women, and, therefore, win more medals also thanks to them (Dean et al. 2022: 222).

When analyzing the ratio of women and men at the Summer and Winter Paralympic Games, two other factors beyond overall participation and the representation within each National Paralympic Committee (NPC) need to be taken into account: the specific sport and the types of medal events offered. To provide an example of the former, wheelchair rugby, despite being a mixed sport, included only two women out of 90 competitors at the 2012 London Games. Likewise, there were some disciplines, like football seven-a-side[32], which were reserved for men, so female athletes could not compete in them. As for the medal events offered, these are linked to the disability classification system (Forber-Pratt 2018: 40), which is based on the principle that all impairments affect an athlete's ability and, consequently, their sports performances, resulting in a disadvantage. This becomes apparent not only when their results are

[32] Nonetheless, according to Ogoura (2022), the number of sports available to women no longer is a central element in female athlete participation, as at the 2020 Tokyo the only discipline exclusively for males was football 5-a-side (football 7-a-side was no longer part of the program) (Ogoura 2018: 132).

compared to able-bodied individuals but also to those of athletes with different, or even the same or similar conditions. This made it necessary to establish criteria that ensure achievements are determined by "skill, fitness, power, endurance, tactical ability, and mental focus" (BOCOG 2008 in Brittain 2018: 143), rather than by the severity of disability. The classification system addresses two issues: first, it determines which impairment groups are eligible to compete in a given sport (for instance, swimming is open to athletes with all types of conditions, while goalball is restricted to those with visual impairments). Second, it dictates which athletes, considering their specific disability and its severity, can compete against one another in a designated medal event. The challenge with this is finding the right balance between establishing categories broad enough to create captivating competitions and sufficiently defined to group only individuals with similar abilities (Brittain 2018: 143).

Returning to the question of gender imbalance, the Paralympic Movement's efforts to make the Games an elite sporting framework, which is also "saleable to sponsors and the media" (Brittain 2018: 144), often result in the reduction of the number of athletes and medal events. This can lead to a scarcity of participants or their combination with another classification group, with which they are not able to compete on equal terms. The problem is that these measures disproportionately affect women and athletes with high support needs (Brittain 2018: 143-144). For example, in athletics, the 100m medal events are equally distributed across male and female athletes and disability classifications. A different situation arises in the 400m, where T36[33] men have the chance to win a medal, yet women do not. This demonstrates the necessity of considering not only whether the number of medal opportunities is equitable for men and women in general – a goal the IPC claims to have achieved, with 43% of the 529 scheduled medal events at Rio 2016 open to women (a 12% growth from London 2012) – but also to investigate every sport and disability group. For the number of events for women to increase, it is essential to have a greater number of elite female athletes in each classification group for each sport (Forber-Pratt 2018: 40-41). However, the reason why the IPC is decreasing medal opportunities for women (and athletes with more severe impairments) is that they are

[33] T36 is one of the four classes (from T35 to T38) in running and jumping for athletes with a coordination impairment (International Paralympic Committee n.d.d.).

considered to have less competitive potential. Nonetheless, this occurs precisely due to the shortage of possibilities offered to them (Peers 2012: 310 in Forber-Pratt 2018: 42).

The limited access of disabled women to Paralympic sport is a multifaceted issue, rooted in a combination of factors. First, they face more marginalization and negative attitudes than men with impairments. This is due to the intersection of socially influenced ideas about gender and disability, resulting in double discrimination. This not only actively discourages their involvement in sport – a reality that impacts 90% of disabled girls and women – but also leaves them significantly more vulnerable to violence, physical and sexual abuse, and exploitation and with higher rates of poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, and poorer health outcomes (Dean et al. 2022: 222). This leads them to feel inadequate and weak because of their impairment and subordinate to masculine ideals that depict them as the weaker gender. These feelings give rise to what Campbell defined as "internalized ableism" (Campbell 2008 in Dean et al. 2022: 227), which refers to negative views about oneself, one's gender and disability, that can lead to further auto-imposed marginalization in certain contexts, including sport participation (Dean et al. 2022: 227).

Even when a woman with a disability manages to get involved in sports, she still confronts additional challenges, such as experiencing prejudice regarding her being athletic (Forber-Pratt 2018: 39) and facing doubts about her sporting capabilities (Forber-Pratt 2018: 42) more than able-bodied female athletes do (Ogoura 2022: 133). Dean et al. (2022) have explained that "women with disabilities must continually contend with prevalent societal attitudes and beliefs that equate athleticism and athletic performances as masculine attributes that require particular embodiments and physiques to compete and be accepted within sporting cultures" (Dean et al. 2022: 222). Such ideals directly influence disabled women's perception of their identity as athletes (Dean et al. 2022: 222). Moreover, even when they surmount these barriers, they still have to deal with expectations of motherhood, which obliges them to negotiate between their athletic aspirations and the pressure to conform to traditional maternal roles. This frequently prevents them from practicing sports and pushes them to stop their careers. Ultimately, such issues are thoroughly summarized by Dean et al. (2022), who claimed that "[women's] involvement within parasport and society more generally remains contingent on and mediated by cultural perceptions, views, and attitudes toward disability and

women" (Dean et al. 2022: 227). These, however, also translate into practical obstacles. Firstly, most disabled women athletes receive unequal economic support compared to their male counterparts. This lack of funding often compels them to work to support themselves and their families (Dean et al. 2022: 227). Secondly, they face greater structural hurdles, including difficulties in accessing adequate facilities, appropriate equipment, adapted accommodation, and specialized trainers (Dean et al. 2022: 222).

To address the limited participation of women with disabilities in sports and their underrepresentation in coaching, officiating, and leadership positions, several measures have been undertaken. Firstly, in 2003, the IPC created the Women in Sport Committee, which aims to advocate for the inclusion of girls and women at all levels of Paralympic sport, identify barriers hindering their participation, suggest initiatives and policies to overcome these obstacles, and ensure their enforcement (Forber-Pratt 2018: 39-40). However, given the significant gender imbalance in leadership roles, which are traditionally viewed as male domains, the IPC decided that an additional, specific action was required. Therefore, that same year, it set a goal for women to occupy at least 30% of positions within its leadership structures. Nevertheless, in 2022, women comprised only four out of 14 IPC Governing Board members (28%), and only 29 out of 173 NPCs' Presidents (16%) (Dean et al. 2022: 221). Secondly, in 2007, a paper on Women, Gender Equality, and Sport was published by the UN to challenge prejudices related to both gender and disability. This document points out the manifold benefits of physical activity for female athletes, including serving as an empowering tool, improving health, and providing opportunities for success (Forber-Pratt 2018: 42). Thirdly, to accelerate and enhance efforts towards gender equity, the IPC partnered with organizations like the Agitos Foundation. From 2014 to 2016, they collaborated on WoMentoring, a program designed to help reach the 30% threshold of women in leadership positions by supporting aspiring female leaders and encouraging their professional development. Although the program was not as successful as they hoped, it is remarkable that it involved mentors and mentees from diverse parts of the world. It is also noteworthy that the Agitos Foundation undertook its own actions to foster women's participation in sport. As a matter of fact, it organized the first international women's para ice hockey training camp. The event received positive feedback, highlighting the importance of creating sport-specific

initiatives for female athletes that cater to both grassroots and elite levels (Dean et al. 2022: 224).

Beyond implementing policies and establishing collaborations, the IPC also put into practice three strategies that directly affected sport and competition structures. The first expanded the number of spots available to women for certain events. The second introduced "gender-free" quotas for others, meaning that there is either no restriction on the number of women or men who can participate (as with wheelchair rugby or boccia), or some spots are allocated by gender with an additional "gender-free" category (as in Paralympic shooting). Nevertheless, the efficacy of this measure has been limited. Specifically, because spots are not exclusively reserved for women, men frequently fill these positions. This phenomenon is particularly evident in "hypermasculinized" disciplines like wheelchair rugby, where dominant masculine ideals are reproduced and women are discouraged from practicing it. Thirdly, the IPC stipulated that new sports can be introduced only if they respect gender balance. Nevertheless, while this policy demonstrates its efforts to provide women with more opportunities, its application is limited solely to new disciplines. A separate, yet related, point arises: it might be argued that the solution to the issues of gender equality is "simply" to increase the number of events and spots open to women. However, it is not a straightforward process. In fact, the total number of athletes who can participate is set by the IOC through a joint agreement with the IPC, meaning that adding positions in one event requires cuts elsewhere. Moreover, even if this approach were adopted, new challenges would emerge as it would be necessary to verify that the female version of the discipline is sufficiently developed nationally and that such changes would not negatively impact the level of the competition or the number of nations able to qualify (Dean et al. 2022: 224-225).

In addition to discussing IPC's measures, it is crucial to analyze their influence on NPCs, as this frequently depends on each committee's level of development and national context. As has already been said, larger and more established NPCs often have greater economic resources. These enable them to more readily adopt IPC's policies and, consequently, to access and create programs that foster women's participation in para sport. Nonetheless, recently founded NPCs face a more complicated situation, which leads them to respond in diverse ways. Some have stated that, while gender parity is paramount, their principal concern is finding *any* athlete who could participate in the

Paralympic Games. Conversely, others have been able to involve more women, including in leadership positions, precisely because their recent establishment allowed them to undertake actions about it from the beginning. In yet other cases, developing NPCs have not focused on gender balance in leadership roles but have worked to create equal competitive opportunities and allocate the same funding for women athletes. In the fourth instance, some are unable to benefit from IPC's strategies for sports and competitions because they cannot send full teams to events in the first place. Be that as it may, the IPC should provide support and training to newer NPCs, adapted to their specific needs and sociopolitical context. These should center not only on helping them create more opportunities for women but also on fostering their development. Ultimately, without programs and events, NPCs do not have any possibility to offer to women (Dean et al. 2022: 225-226).

To conclude, it is essential to outline the strategies that can be adopted by all NPCs, regardless of their founding date. The first relates to visibility (Dean et al. 2022: 226). This is particularly vital given that women receive less media exposure than their male counterparts, and when featured, they are not depicted as engaged in sport (Forber-Pratt 2018: 42). Moreover, it has been demonstrated that the increased representation of the Paralympic Games in the past few decades has contributed to women's participation. As for the practical techniques to boost visibility, these include organizing meetings in schools where women athletes are invited to give talks and producing media content featuring them for social media and television. This should focus on athletes from diverse backgrounds, practicing various sports, and having different degrees of impairment. Furthermore, it should aim not only to create interest in girls and women with disabilities, providing them with role models and encouraging their participation, but also to highlight athletes' successes and capture the public's attention (Dean et al. 2022: 226). Building on this point, Ogoura (2022) has emphasized the need to redirect the spotlight towards women's achievements. Indeed, he pointed out that when female athletes and athletes with disabilities engage in competitive sports, attention often focuses on their bodies and physical appearance rather than their athletic performances and results – a tendency amplified for disabled women athletes. However, enhancing visibility is not the only strategy NPCs should implement. In fact, they should also foster the creation of specific organizations that promote women with disabilities' participation in sports (Ogoura 2022:

133-134). Lastly, they should make efforts to directly recruit potential women athletes. To do so, some NPCs have already partnered with rehabilitation centers and military programs, where representatives talk to newly injured individuals about parasport. Nonetheless, these places inherently carry gendered connotations. Indeed, their link with the Paralympic Movement is one of the reasons behind the imbalance between men and women, as men are typically the ones to be injured in combat. Furthermore, in these contexts, parasport has often been described as the tool to "reclaim" masculinity (Dean et al. 2022: 226). This final point will be referred to later when Oscar Pistorius' self-life writing is covered.

4.3. The Issue of Prostheses and the Cyborg Athlete

To properly discuss the case of Oscar Pistorius, whose self-life writing will be analyzed in the next and final chapter, it is fundamental to first explore the topic of prostheses and their implications, both generally and within the context of parasport. This is discussed in Parlati's article "Controversial Embodiment: Sport, Masculinity, Dis/Ability" (2015), where she drew on Judith Butler's idea that the body, "as a condition of access to the world", is always "comported beyond itself", inherently tied to and shaped by its engagement with the world, preventing it from being an independent or static entity (Butler 1986: 33 in Parlati 2015: 91). Parlati asserted that it is the aspect of "comportment beyond itself" that is central to the understanding of prosthetics. Moreover, she delved into Jacques Derrida's "logic of the supplement" from *Of Grammatology* (1974). According to her (2015), in his analysis of Rousseau's *Confessions*, the author alluded to this "being beyond" by conceptualizing writing as technology that functions as a supplement, which "signifies nothing, [but] simply replaces a lack" (Deridda 1974: 921 in Parlati 2015: 91-92). This perspective seems to imply that "writing, technology and by analogy body prosthetics/addition/augmentation are necessary attempts at fixing otherwise unstable, malfunctioning bodies which are yet to be perfected" (Deridda 1974: 921 in Parlati 2015: 91-92). This idea holds significant consequences for people with disabilities, since they are those who experience the most intensive forms of human-device blending (Haraway 1991: 178 in Parlati 2015: 92), under "the ableist assumption that disabled bodies are broke and require 'fixing'" (Kafer 2009: 224 quoted in Parlati 2015: 92). Evidently, the view that the body can be molded also affects sports culture and

the idealized, perfect bodies that are part of it (Parlati 2015: 92). As a matter of fact, human bodily enhancement systems are becoming another type of solution for boosting sport performances. Similarly to doping, these now contribute to a well-established tendency to gain an unfair advantage, including within the Paralympic Movement (Wolbring 2018: 440).

Before delving into the issue of body-linked assistive devices and sport, I find it crucial to present some ways in which prostheses have been theorized. Firstly, there is the framework provided by Davis's (2002) "dismodernist subject". As explained in the last section of the first chapter, this is partial, incomplete, and interdependent, and technology and interventions represent the only means to achieve wholeness and functionality (Davis 2002: 30). Secondly, Perpich (2005), as discussed by Parlati (2015), offered a view of prostheses not as empowering, but as "defamiliarizing" instruments that disrupt the conception of the body as a whole, following "laws of intrusion" (Perpich 2005: 83 in Parlati 2015: 94-95). These also impact identity since it is linked and depends on bodily integrity (Perpich 2005: 83 in Parlati 2015: 94-95). Thirdly, prostheses are conceptualized through their metaphorical implications. Stiker (1999) stated that they are "also the very idea that you can replace… Replacement, re-establishment of the prior situation, substitution, compensation – all of this now becomes possible language" (Stiker 1999: 123-124 quoted in Hall 2016: 64). This occurs frequently in critical works – including by disability studies scholars – where prosthesis is employed as a theoretical and metaphorical concept to discuss the relationship between technology, modernity, the body, and changing understandings of human beings (Hall 2016: 65). The most emblematic example is, as has been seen, Mitchell and Snyder's theory of "narrative prosthesis" (Mitchell and Snyder 2000: 47). Nevertheless, this has often been criticized for how it idealizes prostheses and diverts attention from the actual embodied experiences of people with disabilities (Siebers 2008: 63 in Hall 2016: 65). For instance, Sobchack (2005) argued that prosthetics should not be talked about from an external point of view, especially since it becomes "incorporated into an individual's body" (Sobchack 2005: 20 in Hall 2016: 65). This perspective is reinforced by Siebers (2008), who observed that while assistive devices are always described as tools to improve abilities in discussion about the cyborg, in real life, they often cause numerous issues (Siebers 2008: 63 in Hall 2016: 30). Federici and Parlati (2018) further contended that "the master narrative that

the cyborg (re)presents is founded on health, on a body which can be augmented and carefully moulded according to one's will and power. Yet, […] not *every* body has the same access to that power of self-construction" (Federici and Parlati 2018: 8).

Notwithstanding these diverse perspectives, disabled individuals, including athletes, have employed body-linked assistive devices for over a century. For instance, George Eyser, who was mentioned in the first section of this chapter, won a gold medal in gymnastics at the 1904 Olympic Games using a wooden leg (Wolbring 2018: 440). A significant turning point occurred in the 1920s, when, as Henri-Jacques Stiker noted in his *History of Disability* (1999), vast numbers of injured and impaired soldiers returned from the First World War. This led to a new conceptualization of rehabilitation, reframing it as a social effort aimed at compensating for the deficits caused by disability. It is in this context that the development of prosthetics significantly accelerated. Indeed, it was an integral part of the desire to restore injured men to a non-disabled "standard", or at least to socially project a sense of "normalcy" and public achievement. In fact, it served a dual purpose: helping injured male bodies and "fixing" the national economy, thereby establishing a connection between capitalist ideals of economic independence and the challenges of physical disability (Stiker 1999 in Hall 2016: 63-64). Beyond this crucial early phase, the continuous progress in science and technology has led to an ever-increasing array of enhancement products, fostering and being influenced by a culture that values the improvement and modification of the body. This ongoing evolution is particularly exemplified by the inclusion of running with artificial legs as an official Paralympic discipline in 1976. Nevertheless, until the past couple of decades, these tools "did not come close in their performance to their biological 'normal' counterparts" (Wolbring 2018: 440). This is rapidly changing and is expected to grow further due to technological advancements. Impaired individuals are now able to acquire instruments that not only "compensate" for and "fix" their perceived physical defects, but can also "'therapeutically' enhance [them] beyond species-typical boundaries" (Wolbring 2004 in Wolbring 2018: 441). Indeed, surveys have demonstrated that if given the choice between a device that equates them to able-bodied and one that provides enhancement, disabled people tend to choose the second (Wolbring 2011 in Wolbring 2018: 441). In addition to the influence of societal ableism, this preference also emphasizes the difficulty in drawing a clear line between restorative and augmentative tools, a distinction further obscured by

a blurred legislative landscape. For instance, while the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2007) requires access to assistive devices, it remains ambiguous on whether this mandate extends to tools that enhance an individual's abilities beyond what is considered typical for human beings (Wolbring 2018: 441).

Just as people with disabilities tend to opt for the "enhancement fix" rather than the "species-typical fix" (Wolbring 2011 in Wolbring 2018: 442), it is reasonable to assume that Paralympic athletes would make a similar choice. Indeed, some body-linked assistive devices are exclusively available to them. A primary example is the "Cheetah legs", a type of prosthesis specifically designed for athletes. The inherent problem with such instruments is their potential to provide an unfair advantage without the athlete actively seeking it. The issue sparked a debate at the 2004 Paralympic Games regarding which "Cheetah legs" versions were more advantageous, a discussion that also involved concerns about the one used by Oscar Pistorius[34]. The controversy[35] escalated when he wanted to participate in the Olympic Games. Erroneously, people believe that the debate about him revolved around the participation of a disabled athlete in the Olympics; however, as explained in the first section of this chapter, several individuals had already done so. The core issue was the concern that his Cheetah legs gave him an unfair advantage, even over able-bodied athletes (Wolbring 2018: 441-442). Despite not seeking this benefit and not engaging in deliberate cheating, this fear led to Oscar Pistorius becoming the first Paralympic athlete whose "therapeutic enhancement" was labelled as a "techno-doping violation", an expression that "refers to the use of a product which might intrinsically give the user an advantage over other athletes" (Wolbring 2018: 442).

Even though it was ultimately proven that Pistorius' Cheetah legs gave him no unfair advantage over his able-bodied competitors, allowing him to participate in the 2012 London Olympic Games[36], it must be acknowledged that "the trajectory of technological

[34] I deem it notable that Oscar Pistorius is cited in any source discussing prosthetics and assistive devices, underscoring his role as the most emblematic example of the conjunction of sport and technology.
[35] For a more detailed examination of this matter, see Chapter 5.
[36] Driven partly by Oscar Pistorius' participation, media coverage of the 2012 London Games notably centered on technology, including his Cheetah blades. This interest was paralleled by two exhibitions on assistive devices, held in the Games' host city. The first had what I considered an extremely fascinating name, "Spare Parts", and showcased second-hand prosthetic limbs turned into works of art through painting, drawing, and writing on their surfaces. The second, titled "Superhumans", displayed various technologies for disabled people, ranging from ancient Egyptian prosthetic toes and early hearing aids to recent items not immediately considered supportive tools, like reading glasses or cell phones (Hall 2016: 11-12).

advancement is now such that even the top Olympic athlete might be outperformed by a disabled athlete in the near future" (Wolbring 2018: 442). Beyond this, the prospect of "so-called non-disabled people"[37] (Wolbring 2018: 443) increasingly resorting to therapeutic enhancements themselves must also be considered. This tendency is closely linked to the issue of transhumanism, defined as "the concept that encompasses the push for moving beyond the species-typical body in general" (Wolbring 2018: 443), and it is leading to a new form of ableism that asserts improving the body is not only advisable but necessary. This trend is likely to be accelerated by the very successes of people with disabilities: if they start to perform beyond the capacities of the able-bodied, the latter may more and more pursue their own enhancements, a dynamic that will undoubtedly extend to the realm of sport. This could result in the creation of new disciplines where both Olympic and Paralympic athletes could compete together, further blurring the boundaries between their two respective events (Wolbring 2018: 443-444). This, in turn, I believe, would add a compelling argument to those previously presented in the "History of the Paralympic Games" section regarding the potential merging of the Games.

It is precisely the scenario described in the last few lines that has been imagined in the movie *Biônicos* (Poyart 2024). Set in dystopian 2035 (Poyart 2024, 07:02), the film centers on Maria, who trained her entire life to become a long jump champion like her mother (Poyart 2024, 15:12). Her promising career, however, came to a halt because of the Bionic Revolution (Poyart 2024, 09:02), which propelled prosthetics to become the "absolute stars of the show" and "one of the most desired and coveted products in the world" (Poyart 2024, 17:34 to 17:44). Initially designed for the rehabilitation of war veterans, not only did they grow to be an everyday object, but, surprisingly, in less than four years, they "[found] […] a special place in the world of sports" (Poyart 2024, 17:45 to 17:55). Indeed, specialized prostheses, more powerful than those available for the average person[38], started to be developed, and bionic athletes began to dominate the competitive landscape (Poyart 2024, 17:56 to 18:10). These futuristic prostheses operate through a "NIM" – the chip that "made the bionic revolution possible" (Poyart 2024,

[37] I found it interesting that Wolbring (2018) consistently used this expression to refer to able-bodied individuals, which I interpret as an effort to reframe the perspective concerning them and to challenge the concept of "normalcy".

[38] I found it particularly interesting how the plot of the movie grounds itself in real-world parallels, namely, the link between prosthesis development and war veterans' needs, and the issue of prostheses for athletes becoming more powerful than those available to the general public.

33:55) – which is implanted in the user's brain to capture all the impulses of the motor cortex and transmit them to the prosthesis. This allows it to move as if it were the natural part of the body (Poyart 2024, 33:48 to 34:06) and thereby creates a "remarkable symbiosis between the mechanical and organic" (Poyart 2024, 35:65). The chip is accompanied by an under-the-skin display that monitors the brain's capacity to sustain the impulses coming from the NIM and signals when it gets closer to zero, a circumstance that would cause a coma to the user (Poyart 2024, 39:26 to 39:48).

While I find it unlikely such a revolution will happen in the real world within a decade, the movie offers interesting insights into the issue of prosthetics and the cyborg athlete. In fact, the central question on which the film is based is "who wants to watch an athlete jump seven or eight meters when bionics have no problem jumping twice as far?" (Poyart 2024, 25:14). This dilemma plays out directly between Maria and her sister Gabi. Having had her right leg amputated in her childhood due to a tumor (Poyart 2024, 15:12) and now using a prosthesis, Gabi's sports successes started to overshadow her sister's after the Bionic Revolution. Maria, together with every other "regular athlete" (Poyart 2024, 16:46), felt left out, which raised an alarming issue: "self-mutilation [became] the new doping" (Poyart 2024, 20:54). This is the solution that Maria adopts. In fact, she makes a pact with Heitor, the leader of a rebel group – originally formed to support non-bionic athletes – which advocates that "all athletes should have the right to amputate their limbs to become bionic" (Poyart 2024, 30:00 to 30:24). Heitor, motivated by his necessity to "build a bionic"[39] (Poyart 2024, 13:34) who could assist him to carry out his robbery plan, helps her stage a motorbike accident to have her right leg amputated. The movie continues by following two parallel narratives: Maria's incredible athletic achievements, which soon surpass those of her sister[40], and the increasingly illegal and violent actions that Heitor forces Maria to commit with her prosthesis as repayment for his role in the accident. This culminates when, at the end of the movie, his group plans to steal a briefcase containing NIMs, and Maria is obliged to jump 25,60 meters from one building

[39] I believe it is noteworthy that the verb "to build" is employed to refer to a person, as it seems to imply not only that individuals who use prostheses lose (a part of) their human nature but that they can be constructed like an object.

[40] This is particularly evident during the Bionic Games (the film's equivalent of the Paralympic Games but with Olympic-scale enthusiasm). Nonetheless, what I wanted to point out about this scene is the statement that "men and women [compete] at the same level […] another revolution made possible by bionic prosthesis" (Poyart 2024, 01:04:54).

to another (Poyart 2024, 01:26:20 to 01:26:45). This emphasizes another crucial message of the movie, that is that "a bionic prosthesis is good for breaking records, but it is also a weapon" (Poyart 2024, 51:55).

It is essential to point out, however, that beyond dystopian films, competitions that revolve exclusively around sport and technology are already a reality. In fact, in 2016, an event "in which so-called disabled and able-bodied people [performed] using bodily assistive devices inbuilt and merged with the human body"[41] (Wolbring et al. 2010 in Wolbring 2018: 452) took place in Zurich, Switzerland. This featured 400 participants (Wolbring 2018: 452) across six disciplines: Powered arm prostheses race, Brain computer interface race, Functional electrical stimulation bike race, Powered leg prostheses race, Powered exoskeleton race, and Powered wheelchair race (Griffiths 2014 in Wolbring 2018: 444). Wolbring (2018) analyzed the media coverage of this "Cyborg Olympics", identifying recurring themes to understand its perception and the insights they offered into the relationship between sport and technology (Wolbring 2018: 444-445). The first topic he pinpointed was technological advancements as an instrument to redefine sport, particularly by acknowledging that sport will no longer be limited solely to the capabilities of the human body (Patel 2016 in Wolbring 445). The second was the role technology plays in helping individuals to overcome their impairments and bodily constraints (Wolbring 446). In the context of the Cybathlon, this was evidenced by two aspects: first, it offered severely disabled athletes the chance to participate in a global sport competition (Charity Today 2016 in Wolbring 2018: 447); and secondly, it prioritized the control of the body and/with the device, rather than only power and speed (Hussey 2016 in Wolbring 2018: 446). This topic is strictly related to another one: the employment of "techno-doping" as an instrument to improve the quality of life of people with (severe) disabilities (Silver 2016 in Wolbring 2018: 448). Specifically, the Cybathlon contributed to the development of tools that can be used by disabled people in daily life. This was possible because it helped establish a better relationship between companies and users so that the former were able to create devices that could better accommodate the necessities of the latter (Patel 2016 in Wolbring 2018: 449). The last theme that emerged

[41] I find it significant that this is the only instance in which Wolbring (2018) employs these terms to refer to able-bodied and disabled individuals. This choice likely aims to underscore that both could participate in the Cybathlon. Yet, he retained the adjective "so-called", thereby emphasizing the notion that these are socially defined categories.

was the comparison between the Cyborg Olympics and the Paralympic Games. In my opinion, two particularly interesting points arose on this topic. The first was Patel's (2016) observation that "unlike the Paralympics, the Cybathlon requires competitors to use technology to offset their disability" (Patel 2016 quoted in Wolbring 2018: 447), a notion directly related to the central argument of the next chapter's section dedicated to Oscar Pistorius. The second was Hutt's (2015) statement that "the Cybathlon may reinvent our vision of what the Paralympic is about. Maybe the athletes we previously regarded as disabled will become superhuman in our eyes" (Hutt 2015 quoted in Wolbring 2018: 447), which is precisely what happened in the movie. Nonetheless, other perspectives are worth mentioning, such as Kieron's (2014) view of the Paralympics as restrictive since the classification system – designed to ensure fair competition - prohibits all non-essential equipment (Kieron 2014 in Wolbring 2018: 447), and Follows' (2016) argument that if the Olympics and the Paralympics were to merge, they would become one "CyberOlympics" (Follows 2016 in Wolbring 2018: 448).

I would like to conclude by pointing out some aspects that challenge the perceived advantages of such events that combine sport and technology. The first element that is important to consider, and which is related to the discussion on gender carried out in the previous section, is that in the same way that the elite status of the Paralympics has not contributed to more participation in parasport at the grassroots level, it is doubtful that events like Cybathlon, which can be regarded as an elite event as well, will favor it. Moreover, it is likely that not only will the employment of technology hinder even more disabled people's participation, since the majority will not have access to it, but it will also make them feel frustrated, given the excitement that surrounds them (Wolbring 2018: 451). Lastly, competitions such as the Cyborg Olympics value the technology, and not the person, like the Paralympics do. This might become problematic as it might shift the public's attention from the essence of parasport. Therefore, the Movement must intervene to ensure that the emphasis remains on the human element. This means, however, that it should redirect focus from technology also on its own media coverage (Wolbring 2018: 459).

5. Contested Selves: Disability's Intersection with Gender and Race in Paralympic Athletes' Self-Life Narratives

5.1. Fixing the Body?

Self-life narratives[42] by Paralympic athletes represent, in my opinion, a particularly compelling case study because they occupy a middle ground between the "somebody" and "some body" memoirs, following the distinction articulated by G. T. Couser (2009) (explained in section 3.1.1.). Indeed, authored by well-known public figures, these texts are composed for an already established readership and as a result of their notoriety. Conversely, they also discuss "what it's like to have or to *be*, to live in or *as*, a particular body […] a body that is usually odd or anomalous" (Couser 2009: 2). This intermediate position is acknowledged also by one of the athletes investigated in this chapter: "the truth is I do not have the typical life of a disabled person. As my profile began to rise steadily […], my life became easier in many ways. People started to recognise me as an athlete rather than a disabled person" (Grey-Thompson 2001: 110). This section investigates if *Seize the Day* by Tanni Grey-Thompson (2001), *In My Dreams I Dance* by Anne Wafula Strike (2024), and *Blade Runner* by Oscar Pistorius (2012) actually present characteristics of both "somebody" and "some body" memoirs and whether one predominates. Furthermore, it analyzes the athletes' embodied experiences, their navigation of societal ableism, and the transformative role of sport in their lives.

The first element that I would like to point out, which is typical of the "some body" memoir, is how, after providing their biographical details[43], all three authors present their conditions, highlighting not only their vindication of their bodies but also underscoring the impact their disabilities have on their identities and existences. Tanni Grey-Thompson was born with spina bifida, a congenital condition she describes as "the non-union of one or more vertebral arches. It can also cause severe brain damage, spasticity and liver and kidney problems. My spina bifida was fairly mild but it wasn't in the best place" (Grey-Thompson 2001: 1-2). Anne Wafula Strike, instead, at two and a half years old (Wafula

[42] In this chapter, I chose to use this term, together with its related concept, "self-life writing", in line with Watson and Smith's (2001) view that these are comprehensive expressions that encompass the heterogeneous variety of (self-)referential practices.

[43] Tanni Grey-Thompson was born on 26 July 1969 in Cardiff (Grey-Thompson 2001: 2), Anne Wafula Strike in a small village called Mihuu in Western Kenya on 8 May 1969 (Wafula Strike 2024: 1), and Oscar Pistorius in Johannesburg on 22 November 1986 (Pistorius 2012: 15).

Strike 2024: 7), contracted polio, a virus "that causes nerve damage" (Wafula Strike 2024: 15). In her case, for example, some muscles lost all functionality, while others maintained partial activity (Wafula Strike 2024: 14-15). As for Oscar Pistorius, he was born without the fibula bones and the outer part of his feet (Pistorius 2012: 15), leading to the amputation of the lower part of his legs, below the knee, when he was eleven months old (Pistorius 2012: 18, 20).

Nevertheless, all three athletes clarify from the beginning that they are at ease with their condition[44]. In fact, Tanni Grey-Thompson claims that "by the age of twelve I'd figured out that things were not going to change and that life was going to be lived in a wheelchair. I didn't have a problem with that" (Grey-Thompson 2001: 12), while Anne Wafula Strike states: "I rarely regarded my disability as a curse, but rather as an inconvenience that I had to work around" (Wafula Strike 2024: 39-40). The same attitude can be found in Oscar Pistorius, who says: "if God were to ask me if I wanted my legs back, I would really have to think carefully about my answer. I do not feel remotely as if I have been short-changed by life. Had I been born with normal legs I would not be the man I am today"[45] (Pistorius 2012: 119). These sentences illustrate that they all reject the notion that their body should be "fixed" or medically altered, a perspective explicitly expressed in Tanni Grey-Thompson's self-life narrative. Indeed, she recounts being recommended a complicated operation that would have required four months of traction, which would not have given her any benefit beyond the supposed advantage of making her legs the same length, a procedure she decisively refused (Grey-Thompson 2001: 14). A similar episode is narrated by Oscar Pistorius, when he relates his parents' difficult decision of whether to attempt reconstructive surgery on at least one foot or amputate directly both his lower legs. Influenced by their meeting with a young boy who had experienced both options and found greater freedom with the latter, they opted for the second alternative, convinced their son would have been more independent by walking with prostheses (see Pistorius 2012: 18-20).

I also think it is worth mentioning, as it ties into these ideas of reclaiming the disabled body when there is a widespread societal pressure to "fix" it, how they all

[44] Nonetheless, instances of internalized ableism are evident in the narratives of Anne Wafula Strike and, to a lesser extent, Oscar Pistorius. This issue will be examined later in this section.
[45] This sentence is particularly remarkable considering that, on Valentine's Day 2013, he shot his girlfriend, Reeva Steenkamp, to death (Watling 2024). This will be explored in further detail in this chapter's last section.

underscored the importance of receiving thorough explanations about their conditions. The most interesting perspective on this point comes from Tanni Grey Thompson, who explains that her parents "always encouraged me to ask questions about what people were trying to do to me" to avoid the common scenario where the doctors would visit her, talk among themselves, and make decisions without consulting her (Grey-Thompson 2001: 5). Oscar Pistorius, on the other hand, defines himself as lucky precisely because he never needed to press the people who surround him to give him answers since everything was always out in the open (Pistorius 2012: 15). Likewise, Anne Wafula Strike lingers on the moment when she underwent an assessment at the Olympic Medical Institute. Performed to determine the extent of her disability (Wafula Strike 2024: 257), it was significant for her because "before I had the test I had known I could do some things and not others, but I hadn't really understood why […] now I had a better understanding of how my body worked" (Wafula Strike 2024: 259-260). Nevertheless, I want to emphasize how, even before the medical evaluation, for Wafula Strike, her body emerged as the unquestionable core of her disabled experience. As she observes, "all the evidence of what I could and couldn't do lay in my body" (Wafula Strike 2024: 250-251).

Beyond these points, several of the examples discussed reveal another crucial element: the pivotal role parents play in these athletes' lives. As a matter of fact, across all three autobiographies[46], it is emphasized how mothers and fathers encouraged the authors to achieve their potential, fostering a positive self-perception. For instance, Pistorius recalls the time his mum baked him a cake to celebrate his first prostheses with moulded feet (Pistorius 2012: 57), while Tanni Grey-Thompson underscores her parents' commitment to letting her do the same experiences as her sister (Grey-Thompson 2001: 4), and highlights how "they realised they had to let me do things for myself and that wrapping me in cotton wool wouldn't do anyone any good" (Grey-Thompson 2001: 11). Similarly, Anne Wafula Strike claims that her dad "was so confident in my abilities that he wasn't prepared to have his belief in me dented by what he considered to be minor setbacks" (Wafula Strike 2024: 118-119). Furthermore, she reports that when she told him that she was scared she was at Joyland School for the Physically Handicapped because her family did not want to take care of her anymore, her father replied "You're at Joyland

[46] I decided to also employ "autobiography", always aligning with Smith and Watson who used it to refer to retrospective life narratives as understood in Western tradition (Smith and Watson 2001: 4).

not because we don't love you or care about you but because this is the best place for you to get a good education and learn how to be independent" (Wafula Strike 2024: 56). A parenthetical observation about mainstream and special-needs schools is relevant here, as they represent an important point of divergence among the narratives. Indeed, Tanni Grey-Thompson recounts "a long hard battle to get me into a mainstream [secondary] school" (Grey-Thompson 2001: 15), a struggle that resulted in her attending, but with the condition of having lunch at a special education facility (Grey-Thompson 2001: 18). On the contrary, Anne Wafula Strike attended a school specifically for children with disabilities, a choice about which she expresses deep contentment. In fact, she says that she "loved school, where I felt equal with the others […] school and home became my two heavens" (Wafula Strike 2024: 38). I attribute these contrasting attitudes to the fact that for Grey-Thompson, a special-needs school would have represented a significant limitation, while for Wafula Strike, it opened far more possibilities than what her inaccessible and superstitious Kenyan village could offer. As for Oscar Pistorius, he simply states that his parents decided that he could go to the former, without even acknowledging that there are people who face discrimination on this issue (Pistorius 2012: 49).

Contrary to what might be expected, the significance that these athletes attach to their bodies does not mean that they overlook the cultural dimension of disability. It is, indeed, a characteristic of contemporary disability self-life narratives to challenge the dichotomy between the medical and the social approaches (Mintz 2007: 8). While this trend is evident in all three autobiographies, when it comes to accessibility issues, it is primarily Tanni Grey-Thompson and Anne Wafula Strike who delve into them. Oscar Pistorius, by contrast, does not engage in such discourses because, I suggest, his walking on prostheses makes him less aware of environmental hurdles. Grey-Thompson addresses this topic from the prologue, where she recounts that when she won third place as *BBC Sports Personality of the Year*, she was not able to get to the stage because there was no ramp. Although she admits that, at first, she was more excited to have been the first Paralympian to win such an award than bothered by the lack of access, she expresses gladness about this incident, as not only did it contribute to raising awareness, but the public indignation also demonstrated a significant shift in perception towards athletes with disabilities following the 2000 Sydney Paralympic Games, indicating they could no

longer be marginalized (Grey-Thompson 2001: xvii-xviii). For Wafula Strike, instead, the problem of architectural barriers emerged particularly when she transitioned to secondary school, especially since she was accustomed to the highly accessible Joyland. In fact, she claims: "There was a step going down to my dormitory and I wasn't used to such things. I fell on my elbow, bruising it badly […] the only toilets were pit latrines and because I couldn't squat, I had to sit on the filthy ground. The baths were not accessible to me either, so I had to sit on a stone to bathe myself"[47] (Wafula Strike 2024: 71-72).

While accessibility challenges have been addressed only by Grey-Thompson and Wafula Strike, these three athletes explore another crucial element of the social approach to disability: ableism and discrimination. Pistorius acknowledges these issues when he says that his mom has taught him to deal with people's curiosity and questions with ease and sense of humor (Pistorius 2012: 49) or when he claims of hating it when people assume a pitiful attitude or change their way of behaving because he is around (Pistorius 2012: 120). An especially insightful moment about this comes from Grey-Thompson, who recounts the shock of dealing with discriminatory attitudes for the first time when she was denied access to mainstream secondary school: "suddenly I realised that I was being treated differently because I was in a wheelchair […] I could do everything other people did. Now I realised some people didn't share my view and it was a shock" (Grey-Thompson 2001: 16). With time, she got used to such treatment, to the point that, once, she decided to carry out an experiment. She was in a shop and wanted to buy a skirt, so she went to the counter, credit card in her hand. When she arrived there, she noticed that the girls behind it were refusing to look at her. Therefore, she decided to wait, without saying anything, and see how long it would take for them to assist her. They even helped another client before the situation was finally addressed. When she asked for explanations for why they were ignoring her, one of the saleswomen replied that she was waiting for her carer to join her. At that point, Grey-Thompson asked her why she assumed she was not alone, to which she replied: "Well, you're in a wheelchair, aren't you?" (Grey-Thompson 2001: 100-101). Anne Wafula Strike also remembers when she first understood she was considered different: "By the time I was eight I was more aware that I fitted in at school and at home, but I didn't fit in with the rest of the world" (Wafula

[47] I would like to specify that, at this point in her life, Anne Wafula Strike still uses callipers and crutches. Nevertheless, I would argue that, unlike Oscar Pistorius, she acknowledges accessibility issues because moving around with these aids is a struggle for her.

Strike 2024: 40). This knowledge was underscored by several remarkable episodes. For instance, she recounts that when she started secondary school she noted that not only did the other students stared at her, but they also whispered about her, with one even declaring they would kill themselves if they were in her situation (Wafula Strike 2024: 73). Furthermore, she describes the patronizing feeling of people complimenting her while touching her cheeks or head and standing above her (Wafula Strike 2024: 81). Beyond these instances of direct discrimination, however, Wafula Strike also faced a more insidious rejection driven by superstition and ignorance when she first contracted polio. As a matter of fact, the villagers thought a black magic spell had been cast on her and that, thus, her family should have gotten rid of her or left her to die, otherwise the curse would have spread (Wafula Strike 2024: 10-11).

While Wafula Strike grew more confident over the years (Wafula Strike 2024: 263), the profound oppression she experienced led her to internalize ableism. This surfaces at different points of her self-life narrative. For example, during her stay at Joyland, she says she "started to doubt him [his father] and wondered if he no longer loved me because I was disabled. I wrote him a letter accusing him of not loving me enough", which she concluded by saying "I didn't write an application to be born" (Wafula Strike 2024: 52). Her choice of words further reveals this attitude: for instance, she defines herself as "ravaged" (Wafula Strike 2024: 178) and "wheelchair-bound" (Wafula Strike 2024: 194). Moreover, her text presents characteristics of the "rhetoric of spiritual compensation" (Couser 2009: 36): in fact, she recounts that her grandmother told her to "Never, ever ask Him why He took away your legs. He has bestowed many rich gifts upon you" (Wafula Strike 2024: 110), an idea she shares, as evidenced by her statement: "My faith in God is strong and I'm convinced that from the time the black mamba snake decided not to bite me that He has been watching over me" (Wafula Strike 2024: 264). Oscar Pistorius also internalized people's assumptions about disability, but a different kind than Anne Wafula Strike, one more oriented towards the idea of the "supercrip" (Couser 2018: 203) and of disabled people as an inspiration[48]. In fact, in the introduction to his autobiography, he states: "I have come to understand how my example can be an inspiration to those who, like me, have experienced and struggled with a

[48] This aspect will reappear in this chapter's last section, when his refusal to self-identify as disabled and his use of his prostheses to reinforce ideals of masculinity will be explored.

physical problem, but who don't want to give up and settle for second best. This can also be true for others who have had to overcome obstacles of a different nature in their lives" (Pistorius 2012: 12). Additionally, he embraces that "the angle they [the media] chose elevated me to a superhero for disabled people worldwide" (Pistorius 2012: 109).

Having analysed the elements that make these texts "some body" memoirs, I deem it now essential to concentrate on what establishes them as "somebody" autobiographies: namely, the role sport played in the lives of Grey-Thompson, Wafula Strike, and Pistorius and their status as Paralympic athletes. A common starting point is the account of how each author began practicing sport. Grey-Thompson states: "I don't remember a time when I wasn't involved" (Grey-Thompson 2001: 22). In fact, she began in primary school by taking part in PE and swimming lessons. The first time she tried athletics was when she participated in the sports day organized by the special school she was forced to have lunch at. However, this did not lead her to focus only on that discipline (Grey-Thompson 2001: 23), and she continued to practice different sports, competing in local and regional events. When she was selected for the 1981 Junior National Games at Stoke Mandeville for wheelchair racing, she decided to dedicate herself exclusively to it, but it was not until she won the 100 meters and set a new British record at the Nationals in 1986, that she began to think she was good and that it could become something more than a hobby (Grey-Thompson 2001: 26). Oscar Pistorius, too, began his sporting career through the emphasis school curricula placed on physical activities. As a matter of fact, over the years, he practiced several disciplines, such as tennis, cricket, long and high jump, wrestling (Pistorius 2012: 49-50), triathlon, and fishing (Pistorius 2012: 52). In June 2003, during a rugby match, he was tackled by two players while he was jumping to catch the ball, breaking his left leg (Pistorius 2012: 85). After three months of rest, he began physiotherapy at the Sports Science Institute of the University of Pretoria. It was there that he was advised to try sprinting – described as "the best way to regain functionality in the knee joint" (Pistorius 2012: 89) – and thus engaged in what would become his specialty. Unlike Grey-Thompson and Pistorius, who got into sport at an early age, Wafula Strike approached it when she was more than thirty years old. After she gave birth to her child, Timothy, she noticed she had put on weight, a consequence also of her increased use of a wheelchair instead of crutches and callipers. Therefore, she joined a gym, where her trainer, aiming to incorporate cardio, proposed she go to the outdoor track and try to

do a lap of it with her wheelchair. After this first attempt, he introduced her to Paralympic sport – a concept entirely new to her – and specifically to wheelchair racing, which she quickly became passionate about. Thus, she decided to pursue it, acknowledging also that, given her age, it would not have made sense to experiment with various other disciplines to find her ideal, a luxury afforded to most athletes – including Grey-Thompson and Pistorius, as previously noted (see Wafula Strike 2024: 193-197).

Another aspect that holds particular relevance for all three athletes is the competitive side of sport. Grey-Thompson narrates four Paralympics in her autobiography, dedicating an entire chapter to each of them. The first was 1988 Seoul (recounted in *Korea Girl*), where she won a bronze in the 400 meters (Grey-Thompson 2001: 46). The second was 1992 Barcelona (*Reigning in Spain*), where she won four golds (in the 100, 200, 400, and 800 meters) (see Grey-Thompson 2001: 84-87). The third was 1996 Atlanta (*An American Nightmare*), where she won and set a new world record in the 800 meters, and secured three silvers in her other races (see Grey-Thompson 2001: 127-129). The fourth was 2000 Sydney (*The Return of the Golden Girl*), where she won four golds again (see Grey-Thompson 2001: 209-213)[49]. Worth mentioning about this edition is also the fact that she was the flag bearer at the closing ceremony (Grey-Thompson 2001: 213-214). As for Oscar Pistorius, the first Paralympics he took part in were the 2004 Athens Games, where he triumphed in the 200-meter race, also setting a new world record[50] (Pistorius 2012: 100-101). He goes into more detail for the following edition, Beijing 2008, likely because he competed in three events (the 100, 200, and 400 meters), winning them all and establishing a new world record for the last one (see Pistorius 2012: 176-179). Because his book was published in 2012, it does not cover the 2012 London Games, but it only focuses on the fact that in his most recent competitions at the time of writing, he was clocking times that would have allowed him to qualify for both the Olympics and the Paralympics (see Pistorius 2012: 186-188). Given that, as stated earlier, she started her athletic career after the age of thirty, Anne Wafula Strike addresses her involvement in sport only later in her autobiography. After narrating how she "[got] the

[49] Her final Paralympic Games, however, were those held in Athens in 2004, where she won the gold in the 100 and 400 meters (Welsh Athletics n.d.).

[50] It must be noted that, because no T43 athletes had qualifying times similar to his, from the 2004 Athens Games onwards, Oscar Pistorius did not compete in the category for bilateral amputees but in that for single amputees (T44) (Pistorius 2012: 145).

fitness bug" (Wafula Strike 2024: 191), she recounts her first (and only) Paralympic experience at the 2004 Athens Games, where, representing Kenya, she took part in the 400 and 800 meters, finishing last in both races (Wafula Strike 2024: 226-227). It was from the following year that she began to obtain better results: for instance, at the Paralympic World Cup, she arrived fourth in the 400 meters and fifth in the 100. Simultaneously, she applied and obtained British citizenship. This propelled her to request release from the Kenyan Paralympic Association, enabling her to join the British team (see Wafula Strike 2024: 235-237). The Paralympic World Cup in 2006 marked the first time she competed with them (Wafula Strike 2024: 240). From the following competitions, she started to improve her times and win "lots of medals", prompting people to say she was "becoming one of the best female racers in the UK" (Wafula Strike 2024: 245). Unfortunately, this did not last long, as at the 2006 World Championship, held in Assen, Holland (Wafula Strike 2024: 245), she was "reclassified as a T54, a more able category" (Wafula Strike 2024: 250). This impeded her from qualifying for the 2008 Beijing Games (Wafula Strike 2024: 256) and for the 2012 London Paralympics, at which point she was also recovering from a shoulder injury (Wafula Strike 2024: 271). Despite these athletes' different athletic careers, I observed, however, that they all narrate the events they participated in similarly: they state the competition they were going to talk about (whether it was the 100 meters, the 200, the 400, etc), their result, their time (and whether they had broken a personal, national, paralympic, or world record) and how they felt before, during, and after. Additionally, they sometimes specify how they did in each section of the race. I find it also worth mentioning, as it was particularly compelling, how Tanni Grey-Thompson relates the heats of the 400 meters at the 1992 Barcelona Games because she uses the present tense:

> After all the waiting and training, I'm on the start line for my first race […] the nerves begin […] I get each sector spot on. I go flat out for the first 100, steady for the next 100 and then kick at 200 and 300. I cross the line first […] then I see the time – 59.20. WORLD RECORD flashes up on the screen in huge letters. It takes a while to sink in […] Then I realise I'm the first woman to go under a minute. (Grey-Thompson 2001: 76-77).

A further aspect that recurs in these self-life writings is the authors' insistence on being recognized as athletes on the same level as their Olympic counterparts. In fact, Grey-Thompson asserts: "I have always wanted to be sponsored as an athlete or not at all" (Grey-Thompson 2001: 38), and "they might have thought we were messing about, but

now they realise we are training as hard as non-disabled athletes"[51] (Grey-Thompson 2001: 225). Likewise, Oscar Pistorius states: "It is for this reason that I have decided to tell my story […] of a man who is chasing his dream – a dream to become an athlete. Not a disabled athlete, simply an athlete"[52] (Pistorius 2012: 12), and "Paralympic athletes need to be subject to the same exacting standards and constructive criticism as their able-bodied counterparts" (Pistorius 2012: 111). These claims are especially interesting because they explicitly underscore how Paralympic athletes' autobiographies are both "somebody" and "some body" memoirs. On the one hand, their necessity to reiterate the fact that they are legitimate athletes highlights their awareness of how disability is socially perceived and their rejection of it. On the other hand, it is precisely their status as athletes – and, thus, as famous individuals – that prompted them to write their autobiographies. This last point is also demonstrated by the fact that they repeatedly acknowledge their fame in their books. For Grey-Thompson, this was reached after Barcelona: "I had to get used to the fact that four gold medals had turned me into a celebrity" (Grey-Thompson 2001: 97). The 2004 Athens Games represented, instead, the turning point for both Anne Wafula Strike – "the fact that I had got into the finals in one race meant that people started to know who I was" (Wafula Strike 2024: 229) – and Oscar Pistorius – "unbeknownst to me, my victory and my status as gold medallist […] had changed my life forever. I became a sporting celebrity overnight" (Pistorius 2012: 109). His perspective on fame, however, deserves consideration. As a matter of fact, he claims that being famous does not benefit an athlete's career; therefore, sportspeople should remain indifferent to it (Pistorius 2012: 191-192). I found his stance deeply paradoxical, as he possesses the greatest public recognition among the authors examined, his prominence stemming, first, from the controversy surrounding the supposed advantage of his Cheetah blades and, second, from his conviction for killing his girlfriend.

The last aspect that I would like to talk about is that Grey-Thompson and Wafula Strike's autobiographies engage in activism[53]. I will begin with Grey-Thompson's

[51] I would like to point out Tanni Grey-Thompson's use of "non-disabled" to refer to able-bodied individuals.

[52] This sentence from Pistorius, however, is ambiguous. While it aligns with Paralympians' push for equal recognition, within the context of his autobiography, it can be simultaneously be interpreted as another manifestation of his rejection of his disability. His complex relationship with his impairment will be explored further in this chapter's last section.

[53] This aspect is compelling because, although activism might initially appear to be a characteristic of the "somebody" memoir, what they advocate for is more aligned with the "some body" dimension.

outlook on this: “I don’t think I have any right to put myself forward as a spokesperson for the disabled because I don’t have to endure many of the problems many people encounter” (Grey-Thompson 2001: 112). While I understand and might agree with her point of view, I found it curious that she *does*, nonetheless, undertake a form of advocacy: for instance, she claims that she would like more people to have participated in the discussion around the Disability Discrimination Act as it was being formulated. Moreover, she highlights the higher cost of living for disabled individuals compared to able-bodied people, the persistent inaccessibility of places, and the continued presence of systemic discrimination within society (Grey-Thompson 2001: 107-108). It is also true, however, that in her activism, she primarily focuses on questions related to parasport, in accordance with her principle of speaking only on subjects she has firsthand experience with. For example, she advocates for the implementation of programs for children, given that mainstream schools often fail to introduce them to Paralympic sport, partly due to the lack of specialized training for PE teachers (Grey-Thompson 2001: 220). Furthermore, she also emphasizes the need to expand opportunities for teenagers and young adults by establishing more age-appropriate groups (Grey-Thompson 2001: 68) and to include disabled athletes in the governing body in charge of athletics (Grey-Thompson 2001: 225). Unlike Grey-Thompson, who performs activism *through* her text, Wafula Strike describes episodes in which she *actually* dedicated herself to the betterment of the Paralympic Movement. For example, while in Kenya, with the rest of the team, she participated in a meeting aimed at requesting the government to provide financial support for aspiring parasport athletes. Following this, as an initial step, individuals were encouraged to participate in a mainstream marathon, running in wheelchairs alongside able-bodied people (Wafula Strike 2024: 231). Most of the activist efforts she narrates, however, aimed to raise awareness about everyday issues and fight for civil rights. For instance, she took part in a campaign by the Disability Rights Commission, and her photo was next to the slogan “I’ll never get a seat on the board, I’m in the wrong chair” (Wafula Strike 2024: 192-193). Nonetheless, the most emblematic example is when she spoke out after a humiliating episode she experienced on a train. This involved her wetting herself because not only was the accessible toilet out of order, but she was also not informed about it before getting on board. In narrating this incident, Wafula Strike is extremely honest about two aspects: first, how, in that moment, she felt disabled, marginalized,

dehumanized, invisible, and dignity-deprived (see Wafula Strike 2024: 292-296); and second, why she decided to openly talk about it. She explains that she "[went] public […] because I was afraid that if nothing was done, the problem would continue" (Wafula Strike 2024: 294). She further asserts that "it is not that I particularly enjoy speaking out. But I don't have the luxury of choosing it, or of it being a decision […] speaking out empowered me again and it put the issue on the table, forcing the government to speak about it publicly" (Wafula Strike 2024: 296).

To conclude, I contend that *Seize the Day* (2001) by Tanni Grey-Thompson, *In My Dreams I Dance* (2024) by Anne Wafula Strike, and Blade Runner (2012) by Oscar Pistorius are all examples of "new disability memoirs" (Couser 2009: 164) as all authors displayed a deep disability consciousness and their autobiographies explicitly engaged in activism. Their bodies occupied a central role in their experiences as individuals with disabilities and as athletes, but they all, to varying extents, reject the idea that they should be "fixed" to conform more to a supposed "norm". Ultimately, my analysis demonstrated that these texts indeed exhibited characteristics of both "somebody" and "some body" memoirs, with neither type prevailing.

5.2. Negotiating Womanhood and Africanness

As I have discussed in the sub-chapter "Gender Disparities and/at the Paralympics", female athletes continue to be underrepresented in all aspects of parasport. This is likely due to the fact that disabled women face greater marginalization and prejudices than men with impairments because of the intersection of socially influenced notions about gender and disability (Dean et al. 2022: 221-222). This section aims to investigate whether Tanni Grey-Thompson and Anne Wafula-Strike narrated some examples of this twofold discriminatory attitude in their autobiographies. Furthermore, it analyses their navigation of the social expectations related to womanhood and motherhood. Lastly, it focuses on Wafula Strike, highlighting how coming from Kenya impacted her experience of disability and within the Paralympic Movement.

To begin, both Wafula Strike and Grey-Thompson demonstrate awareness of the double discrimination that affects female athletes. The former alludes to this aspect when stating that, while she was at the 2004 Athens Games, two American wheelchair racers expressed their excitement that a woman, especially one from an African country, was

embarking on a Paralympic career (Wafula Strike 2024: 223). Moreover, when she relates she was awarded an MBE (Member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire) for her contributions to charity and disability sport (Wafula Strike 2024: 279), she claims that "this honour was not just for me, but also for the many other African young women, who can only dream, who never know whether their dreams will become a reality" (Wafula Strike 2024: 282). Grey-Thompson not only makes a similar assertion – "Nobody believed the girl in the wheelchair could be an athlete" (Grey-Thompson 2001: 30) – but she also delves deeper by exploring specific gender issues in the Paralympic Movement. First, she argues that "the men always try to show off and women try to keep up with them as that's the best way of showing how quick you are" (Grey-Thompson 2001: 46), highlighting how women always have to prove themselves. It struck my attention, however, when she states that "the way I judge myself is by comparing how I race against men" because it shows that she has – at least partially – internalized this dynamic (Grey-Thompson 2001: 72). Second, she notes how the most common way to cheat in wheelchair athletics is not through drugs, but trying to be classified in the wrong group – one for people with more severe impairments – to gain an advantage. The fact that this occurs more often with men as there are larger financial resources at play indicates a gender disparity also from an economic perspective (Grey-Thompson 2001: 88). Third, she recounts how, when she was in Switzerland for the Swiss Nationals and the Olympic Trials in 2000 (Grey-Thompson 2001: 184), there was no female official with them, thereby addressing the problem of the lack of women in all aspects of parasport (Grey-Thompson 2001: 187). She similarly suggests this point when she talks about Helen Rollason – "the first broadcaster to see the Paralympics as pure sport" – and recognizes that "she must have faced a lot of challenges to become a female sports presenter" (Grey-Thompson 2001: 137-138). What I found most noteworthy, nevertheless, is an emblematic episode that she recounts, as it precisely illustrates the double discrimination that women face. As the 1994 Commonwealth Games in Victoria included an exhibition race for men, but not for women, the Wheelchair Racing Association put her name forward as team manager. However, someone in a higher position within the Commonwealth Games Council for England – whose identity she did not specify – objected to her taking this job and explicitly told her: "You can't go to Canada as the team manager because you are a woman and a wheelchair-user" (Grey-Thompson 2001: 115).

At that point, Grey-Thompson challenged him to put it in writing, and he agreed. His office then attempted to justify his stance by claiming that he did not mean to be demeaning but was merely concerned about her capacity to fulfill this role. This was illogical since, as an athlete, she possessed an excellent understanding of the team's needs and extensive knowledge of the international technical rules. It took her asking for backing from Pete Carruthers, the individual from the Wheelchair Racing Association who proposed her name, for her to get the authorization to go to Victoria (Grey-Thompson 2001: 115-116).

Beyond the realm of sport, both Grey-Thompson and Wafula Strike explore the complex topic of navigating sentimental attachments. According to Mintz (2007), female self-life narrative writers have often internalized the assumption that women are asexual and undesirable and, therefore, excluded from romantic and erotic relationships[54] (Mintz 2007: 10). Hence, I decided to investigate whether Grey-Thompson and Wafula Strike hold this belief. Consistent with previous observations, I found that the latter is more influenced by it than the former. As a matter of fact, despite being once directly told by a boy that he would never date someone in a wheelchair (Grey-Thompson 2001: 8), Grey-Thompson states that even in secondary school, she never had the impression that guys would not go out with her because of her disability (Grey-Thompson 2001: 25). On the contrary, Wafula Strike expresses greater insecurity. This can be traced to two factors: first, as has already been said, her internalization of ableism: "[I] wondered if I would ever find that kind of perfect love because of my far from perfect body"[55] (Wafula Strike 2024: 89). Second, her experiences with three damaging episodes. Firstly, she was significantly affected by what happened to Grace, one of her friends at Joyland who had also contracted polio: when she was fifteen, Grace was raped by a man, got pregnant, and died while giving birth (Wafula Strike 2024: 82). The second occurred when she was sixteen, while on the bus to Nairobi. A "very handsome boy climbed aboard" (Wafula Strike 2024: 93) and sat down in front of her. They started talking and flirting, even planning a date for the following Saturday. Nevertheless, as soon as they arrived and Anne stood up using her callipers and crutches, "his face change[d] from eager interest to a kind

[54] Notably, Oscar Pistorius' narrative omits discussions of the impact that his disability might have had or had on his romantic relationships. In fact, it simply outlines the sequence and the evolution of his dating life with his various partners (Pistorius 2012: 52-53, 93-94, 160-161).
[55] I deem it important to point out how, once again, the body assumes a central position in the views and experiences of disabled individuals.

of revulsion. He almost physically recoiled from me" (Wafula Strike 2024: 94). The last one happened when she was in university and fell in love with her friend Andrew. The interest was reciprocated, and one evening, they decided to officially start dating. Nonetheless, a couple of days later, she received a letter from Andrew, which said that he loved her, but his family did not approve of their relationship because of her disability (see Wafula Strike 2024: 111-113). Though this episode profoundly impacted on Wafula Strike's self-confidence, it is striking that she, however, interprets it through a social model lens: "Society and its stupid values were denying two people the chance of a lifetime of happiness together just because a virus had randomly swept through my body a couple of decades before" (Wafula Strike 2024: 113).

Despite her self-doubt about her worthiness of being loved, Wafula Strike challenged her own and society's way of thinking when, in August 1998, she met Norman, an English teacher volunteering in Kenya for a charity called Voluntary Service Overseas. Initially, Anne was reluctant to get into a relationship as she was planning to go to Australia to study. Nevertheless, she eventually fell in love with him, despite the age gap and the cultural differences (see Wafula Strike 2024: 132-134, 137-138, 141-142). In 2000, at the end of what was meant to be just a temporary visit to the UK, they decided to get married, and she moved there permanently (Wafula Strike 2024: 162). Grey-Thompson likewise embarked on a serious romance with Ian, a wheelchair racer she met on a training weekend in 1986. It was not until between 1993 and 1994, however, that their friendship turned into something different, a development also fostered by their shared focus on training and competing (Grey-Thompson 2001: 114-115). Their alignment in their priorities was also evident from their decision to get married on the 1st of May 1999, a date they chose to fit their respective competition schedules and because "it was two weeks after [the] London [Marathon] and wouldn't disrupt the track season" (Grey-Thompson 2001: 168). I believe it is also remarkable that not only do Grey-Thompson and Wafula Strike, through their relationships, question widespread ideas about the sexuality of women with disabilities, but they also challenge general gender stereotypes. Indeed, when Grey-Thompson started dating her future husband, she preferred to maintain a long-distance relationship rather than move in with him because she did not yet have a job and she did not want him to support her, even if he would have gladly done so (Grey-Thompson 2001: 115). Similarly, Wafula Strike states that her long-

term goal had been to find a job that would have allowed *her* to support both herself *and* her husband so that he could pursue his dream of becoming a novelist (Wafula Strike 2024: 153-154). Furthermore, she indicates that an additional reason for her contentment with getting her own place was her awareness that most other girls moved directly from their parents' house to that of their husband's family (Wafula Strike 2024: 121). These instances, in my opinion, are doubly powerful because they come from women with disabilities: the expectation of their dependency, both in terms of living and economic, makes their refusal to rely on a partner, or willingness to provide for him, all the more significant.

As for intimate relationships, another subject that emerges in both Grey-Thompson and Wafula Strike's self-life narratives is pregnancy and motherhood. Yet, once again, the way that the two athletes address the topic differs considerably. Grey-Thompson only mentions it once. Aligning with her primary focus on athletics, she introduces the theme by discussing how a child impacts a sporting career. Indeed, she had observed athletes both stopping and continuing to compete throughout all the phases of maternity. However, she admits she would not know her own preference until she has to face that decision, though she and her husband are incredibly keen on the idea of starting a family. She adds that, even if she has a disability, she is not worried about her own ability to take care of a baby. Nevertheless, she expresses concern about the practical problems pregnancy would entail, such as transferring and getting her wheelchair into and out of her car (Grey-Thompson 2001: 231). Conversely, Wafula Strike recurrently treats the topic, as the desire for motherhood had been present in her since she was young. Unfortunately, after she decided to see a doctor to establish if it was physically possible for her to carry and give birth to a baby, she was told that, even if she did conceive, she would not have been able to continue the pregnancy due to the effects of polio on her body (Wafula Strike 2024: 127). Although I can imagine that such news could be hard to come to terms with, her reaction further demonstrates how she internalized ableism. Indeed, she asserts that she used to silently pray: "Dear God, if you can just let me be a mother you will remove all my shame about being disabled at a single stroke" and "make up for all the bad things I'd been through in my life" (Wafula Strike 2024: 169). This negative attitude, I argue, is also likely influenced by her African culture. As a matter of fact, she states that in her society "women who can't bear children are often looked down

on" (Wafula Strike 2024: 127) and are not considered complete (Wafula Strike 2024: 118). It is worth mentioning, however, that despite what the medical professionals had said, Wafula Strike was able to get pregnant (Wafula Strike 2024: 174) and gave birth through a scheduled Caesarean to a baby boy (Wafula Strike 2024: 182-183). While Grey-Thompson feels confident in her capabilities to take care of a child, Wafula Strike admits she "struggled at first to do anything at all for Timothy […] [but] by a process of trial and error I worked out the best ways to be a disabled mum […] Baby textbooks were all very well, but they didn't fit in with real life, not my real life anyway" (Wafula Strike 2024: 184-185). Within the broad topic of pregnancy and motherhood, both authors also crucially discuss the possibility of having a child with a disability. Grey-Thompson asserts that she and her husband talked about it, but she does not know how she would feel until it eventually happens. Nonetheless, contrary to what some might expect, she states that being a disabled woman would prove advantageous, given her insight (Grey-Thompson 2001: 231). Wafula Strike, instead, explains that she and her husband confronted the question when she was already pregnant: the doctors informed them that there was a risk that the baby had certain genetic conditions and advised them to do an amniotic fluid test. However, as this procedure increased the probability of miscarriage, she and Norman decided not to proceed with it, sharing the belief that "a child is a blessing whether or not it has a disability […] If we aborted an imperfect child, how would we know whether or not that child might be the one destined to discover a major cure for cancer?"[56] (Wafula Strike 2024: 180).

Shifting focus, it is also fundamental to point out that Wafula Strike's autobiography offers an additional compelling perspective by incorporating the dimension of race within the experience of a Paralympic female athlete. This is partially acknowledged by the author herself: "growing up disabled in America and growing up disabled in Africa are not the same" (Wafula Strike 2024: 234). The first element that I would like to discuss is the fundamental differences in the living conditions in Kenya compared to what Western societies are accustomed to. These are introduced from the first pages, where Wafula Strike describes her childhood home: "the floor and walls were

[56] I included the full quotation here because, despite a promising start, the latter part is, in my view, debatable. While I understand the overall message she intends to convey, the final rhetorical question subtly undermines her idea that a child, whether disabled or not, is a blessing, by suggesting that their worth is determined by remarkable achievements.

made of mud and cow dung, and a certain type of reed that grew near the river made a cool and shady roof […] We had no electricity, but used kerosene lamps" (Wafula Strike 2024: 3-4). They also did not have running water; thus, they would collect it from the river (Wafula Strike 2024: 5). In fact, she recounts that when she arrived at Joyland, she, like all the other children, was terrified by the sound of the flushing toilets and the showers (Wafula Strike 2024: 27). Of particular interest is also her remark that "at home we all used tree bark to clean our teeth but at school I was given two alien things instead – a toothbrush and toothpaste" (Wafula Strike 2024: 32). On a broader societal level, Wafula Strike highlights both the limited access to education, noting that most children in her village did not attend school, and the difficult conditions within healthcare facilities. Indeed, she claims she lost her brother Ken because he was forced to share the bed – a not uncommon practice in Kenya because of the lack of resources – with a man who had tuberculosis (Wafula Strike 2024: 266). Similarly, hospitals' demand for payment for all services (Wafula Strike 2024: 286) was the cause of her brother Bishar's passing (Wafula Strike 2024: 288). As a matter of fact, her family was required to make a deposit before he could be admitted, and, because they were able to pay just half of it, Bishar did not receive the best treatment (Wafula Strike 2024: 285-286).

Another compelling element for consideration is Wafula Strike's account of the Kenyan population's unfamiliarity with European white people and the particular beliefs and behaviors that it gave rise to. First, she recounts her own childhood convictions about them. For instance, she narrates that, at Joyland, she "had […] seen white people for the first time. I discussed these strange creatures with my sisters. We concluded that they weren't the same kind of humans as us. I believed that they never went to the toilet and could not die" (Wafula Strike 2024: 37). Subsequently, she turns her attention to her family, explaining that, when she first introduced her husband to them, most of her relatives had never met a white person, so they could not stop asking why he looked like that and "were keen to touch Norman's skin and hair, as if he were some sort of museum curiosity" (Wafula Strike 2024: 149-150). Moreover, she says that, while some of her cousins asked her to find them a white husband, others admitted they would have been scared to share the bed with a white man (Wafula Strike 2024: 212). This feeling of fear towards white people is described more explicitly by Wafula Strike, for example, when she highlights that "some Kenyans chose not to vaccinate their offspring because they

thought that whatever substance those strange syringes were putting into children's bodies was a plan of the white man to reduce the African population" (Wafula Strike 2024: 14).

Despite this pervasive distrust, the influence of the UK is apparent, especially within her family. In fact, she claims that her dad "admires the British way of doing things" (Wafula Strike 2024: 3), a sentiment that – I noticed – is also reflected in Anne and all her siblings having English names (Wafula Strike 2024: 2). Beyond these family attitudes, a significant manifestation of British impact was Joyland, as it was governed by the Salvation Army, which also enabled Anne to attend it without paying a fee (Wafula Strike 2024: 24). This management further resulted in the school's curriculum being the same as other Kenyan schools but integrated with British textbooks and European ways of teaching (Wafula Strike 2024: 32). The aspect of the school that I found most striking, nonetheless, is that all the pupils were part of a child sponsorship program, which also entailed regularly writing letters to thank their supporters and being photographed with the gifts they would send them (Wafula Strike 2024: 36). Her family and Joyland led Wafula Strike to hold high expectations regarding the UK, which she "saw […] as both a land of plenty and the centre of civilization" (Wafula Strike 2024: 155). When she first travelled there with Norman (Wafula Strike 2024: 155), these were not disappointed – for instance, she was surprised by the constant availability of gas in kitchens and clean running water in houses, and equally astonished by the healthcare system –; yet, they did not prevent her from seeing the downsides. For instance, she affirms she "was also really shocked when I found out that some people couldn't read and write. The British were the people who had brought literacy to us. How could it be that some of them were illiterate?" (Wafula Strike 2024: 158-159). Additionally, she remarks that, when she was in Kenya, she had a nice apartment, a respectable social position, and comfortable living conditions, while when she arrived in "a rich country [...] was struggling at the bottom of the pile" (Wafula Strike 2024: 170). This sentiment, as one might expect, also emerges when she narrates the episode of the train previously mentioned, as she states: "When you're growing up in Africa, you believe that Britain treats their disabled and their vulnerable people with respect and care. I had a lot to learn" (Wafula Strike 2024: 293).

The fourth significant point concerning Wafula Strike's Kenyan background is her experience with wheelchairs. The first time Wafula Strike saw "a chair like that with big wheels attached to it" (Wafula Strike 2024: 26) was upon her arrival at Joyland when the

teacher used one to take her to her room. While a five-year-old's unfamiliarity with a wheelchair might not seem remarkable (Wafula Strike 2024: 26), the crucial aspect lies in the reason for this, which Wafula Strike herself explains along with why she always used callipers and crutches: "Wheelchairs were rarely used in Kenya and were very difficult to get hold of, so I never even thought about trying to get one" (Wafula Strike 2024: 98). This unacquaintedness led to a cultural shock when she arrived in England and noticed "there was no one at all using the heavy contraptions that I dragged myself around with" (Wafula Strike 2024: 160). Despite this sudden awareness, she began using a wheelchair only one year later, when she was two-and-a-half months pregnant, as her doctor informed her that if she continued to move around like she used to, she could put herself and the baby in danger. The day she started to use a wheelchair, her life permanently changed, as it allowed her to move with greater ease. She describes this experience by saying: "It was as if I had been reborn […] It gave me an incredible sense of freedom and independence […] the wheelchair made me feel much closer to the able-bodied world than callipers and crutches ever did"[57] (Wafula Strike 2024: 176-177). I want to point out that this statement is crucial because it challenges a common preconception that most able-bodied individuals have, demonstrating that a wheelchair is not inherently a limitation.

Evidently, Wafula Strike's origin also considerably impacted her sporting career. For instance, she acknowledges that, when she participated in the 2004 Athens Games, she "was the first Kenyan and in fact the first East African" (Wafula Strike 2024: 227) to compete in wheelchair racing. This was more significant for her and her country than her final position in the race (Wafula Strike 2024: 228). Indeed, she asserts that, when she came back from Greece, Kenyans were just starting to know about the discipline, which they called "bicycle riding for the disabled" (Wafula Strike 2024: 229), and even asked her how she would manage "a white person's sport"[58] (Wafula Strike 2024: 229). However, the most prominent example of the influence of her race on her athletic career was when she was reclassified. While at the 2006 World Championships in Assen, Holland, she was summoned by UK Athletics officials who informed her that they had been told that she was able to stand up and do sit-ups. Despite these activities being

[57] Tanni Grey-Thompson expresses a similar idea when she explains the importance her wheelchair has for her, claiming that "[her wheels] are my legs" (Grey-Thompson 2001: 82).
[58] This represents an additional example of the Kenyan population's unfamiliarity with white people.

incompatible with how polio affected her body, she was demoted to a category for people with less severe disabilities (Wafula Strike 2024: 250). In addition to admitting that she was more offended by the implication that she was a cheater than by the reclassification itself, she wonders – among other reasons, including a lack of understanding about her condition – if it happened because of racism (Wafula Strike 2024: 252-253). Nonetheless, I want to point out that, in 2017, a former UK Athletics head coach, Peter Eriksson, accused Ian Thompson (Tanni Grey-Thompson's husband and one of the UK team coaches in Assen), claiming that his asking for Wafula Strike's reassessment was unethical. In fact, Wafula Strike competed in the same group (T53)[59] as his wife, and her demotion would therefore represent an advantage for Grey-Thompson by reducing the number of rivals. Kathryn Periac, a former UK Athletics assistant performance manager, supported the accusation, stating that Thompson had raised doubts about Wafula Strike already during the 2006 Paralympic World Cup in Manchester. Periac claimed she had tried to dissuade him by asserting that Wafula Strike perfectly aligned with the T53 athlete profile. Despite this, the classification was enacted, and she was moved to the T54 group. The process also presented other irregularities, such as the disappearance of Wafula Strike's medical records before her reassessment tests. When confronted about these events, Grey-Thompson confirmed that her husband suggested reevaluating Wafula Strike but maintained that she had no personal interest, having retired the following year. However, the results in Assen contradicted this claim: indeed, while Wafula Strike finished second-last in the T54 200m heat, Grey-Thompson won the gold in the corresponding T53 race (Taylor and Foggo 2017).

In conclusion, both Tanni Grey-Thompson and Wafula Strike acknowledge in their self-life narratives the intersection of disability and womanhood in their identity as athletes. Grey-Thompson, however, delves deeper into how this translates into specific issues in the Paralympic Movement. Furthermore, both discuss the establishment of romantic relationships. Nonetheless, once again, Wafula Strike demonstrates internalized ableism, doubting the possibility of having a partner due to her being a wheelchair user. The two also explore the topic of pregnancy, motherhood, and the chance of having a disabled child. While Grey-Thompson just mentions these aspects, Wafula Strike dwells

[59] Athletes in this category possess full arm functionality, but have no or limited trunk function (Taylor and Foggo 2017).

on these themes more extensively. I would argue that this is the most fundamental dimension of her life, more than her athletic career, contrary to Grey-Thompson, who always put sport at the center. Lastly, I investigated the role of race in Anne Wafula Strike's experience, which represents an additional layer of marginalization. It emerged that her being Kenyan impacts her on several levels, starting from her way of living and her relationship with white people and the UK to the management of her disability and, evidently, her time as a wheelchair racer.

5.3. Overcompensation and Toxic Masculinity

In 1988, Asch and Fine argued that the assumed characteristics of disability, such as being dependent and vulnerable, are presented as antithetical to the image of the ideal male, which is a blend of independence and virility (Asch and Fine 1988: 175 in Parlati 2015: 96). However, Oscar Pistorius – whose controversial figure is probed in this last section through an analysis of his autobiography *Blade Runner* (2012) – puts this dichotomy into question. In fact, as Parlati (2015) noted, he represents an especially compelling case because of his "in-between status of enhanced masculine/muscular icon and disabled person, […] [raising] questionings of disability, gender and sport culture alike" (Parlati 2015: 95-96). Nevertheless, Pistorius always made a point of rejecting the second framework, including in his memoir where he claims: "I don't think of myself as disabled. I have limits, but we all have limits and like anyone else I also have many talents" (Pistorius 2011: 60). According to Anne Hickey-Moody (2015), "carbon fibre is the […] homosocial technology that propelled Pistorius beyond the socio-cultural politics of disability […] and the surface that connects him to global assemblages of sporting masculinity" (Hickey-Moody 2015: 146 quoted in Parlati 2015: 97). Indeed, carbon fibre "extends the surfaces of bodies and produces masculinity on and across surfaces, male and female bodies" (Hickey-Moody 2015: 139 quoted in Parlati 2015: 97). Building on these theorizations, this section aims to investigate whether, in his autobiography, his Cheetah legs are explicitly represented as a tool to overcome his impairment and reinforce his masculinity, which reached its most toxic peak when he killed his girlfriend, Reeva Steenkamp, on the night of Valentine's Day in 2013 (Watling 2024).

Before delving into the topic of his prosthetic limbs, it is crucial to recognize, however, that the toxic masculinity characterizing Pistorius did not originate solely from

him, but was also fostered by his family, particularly his father, and by the environment in which he grew up. This is evident in the fact that, in relating different episodes of his existence, Pistorius frequently repeats expressions like "this is an excellent example of the Pistorius attitude to life" (Pistorius 2012: 17), "with typical Pistorius grit" (Pistorius 2012: 21), "in true hard-headed family style" (Pistorius 2012: 24), and "in true Pistorius fashion" (Pistorius 2012: 55). These, particularly the ones that emphasize an intrinsic "Pistorius" way of being, highlight a familial construction of identity built on strength and toughness that aligns with conventional, often questionable, ideals of masculinity. This is also illustrated by his account that he and his siblings were raised with the strict rule that nobody was allowed to say that they could not do something (Pistorius 2012: 11), and that his father demanded absolute discipline from them (Pistorius 2012: 35), points further corroborated by his brother Carl. In a letter to Oscar reported at the end of the autobiography, Carl states that their father's exceptionally high standards meant he always expected the best from them and that they were raised with the idea that they could achieve whatever they set their minds to (Carl Pistorius 2008 in Pistorius 2012: 200-201). This approach is also confirmed in their father's letter, as he admits to Oscar: "I was much harder on you (sometimes even cruel)", a strictness he justifies by asserting: "I knew that you needed to be self-sufficient always […] I knew that you would encounter more obstacles in your life" (Henke Pistorius 2008 in Pistorius 2012: 219). Carl, however, adds another layer to this rigid upbringing, recalling that "whenever we came to him in tears and looking for reassurance, he would reprimand us and tell us that crying was only for weaklings and sissies" (Carl Pistorius 2008 in Pistorius 2012: 200). Nonetheless, this last aspect of discouraging emotional expression extended beyond their family. For instance, Pistorius recounts that, after the accident during the rugby match, a man from the audience screamed at him to "stop behaving like a girl". Pistorius "not wishing to be seen as a sissy, […] pulled [himself] up but was in a lot of pain" (Pistorius 2012: 86).

Beyond the realm of family and sport, another fundamental environment in shaping Pistorius' toxic masculinity was Pretoria Boys' High School, which he attended from 2001 to 2005. A military-inspired boarding school, its "objective was to produce both well-educated and well-rounded young gentlemen" (Pistorius 2012: 71). The issue, however, lay in the methods that were employed to achieve this goal. In fact, although corporal punishment is illegal in South African schools, "on occasion people would turn

a blind eye" (Pistorius 2012: 71): prefects were in charge of discipline and, since they were trusted completely by the teachers, they were expected to do what was necessary. This led them to often choose more physical punishments, instead of the more traditional one involving writing a thousand-word essay on a given topic. These entailed, for example, waking students up at four thirty in the morning and forcing them to run for 50 meters, drink something, roll on the ground, and then replicate the entire procedure for two and a half hours. Remarkably, in this initial recount of his Pretoria Boys' High School experience, Pistorius expresses a disturbing preference for the physical punishment over the written one, a choice he even boasts about, indicating a problematic attitude (see Pistorius 2012: 71-73). Another questionable aspect of the school was the rites of passage that students had to go through at the beginning of their first year. As a matter of fact, on their first day, they had to enter one by one in the Honours Hall, get onto one line of tables, and walk barefoot until the other end. At that point, they had to tell a joke. The older pupils, lined up next to the tables, were instructed not to laugh and instead to tell the boy to try again or lift his T-shirt and show his muscles. If someone refused, all the students would jump on and around the table and scare him. Although he recognizes that it was terrifying, Pistorius unsettlingly justifies the procedure as "thereafter you are accepted as one of them into dormitory life" (Pistorius 2012: 73-74). Another initiation ritual occurred during the camping weekend. On that occasion as well, prefects were given *carte blanche*, a freedom they often exercised by, for instance, waking students in the middle of the night, throwing buckets of freezing water at them. They would also require them to undergo difficult tests, such as leaving them in an isolated field with only a compass and obliging them to find a way to go back to the camp within a specified time. Once again, Pistorius defends these practices by claiming that: "it was really tough, but in my opinion the experience was character-building" (Pistorius 2012: 74-75). His explicit embrace of such methods is alarming, as it demonstrates his internalization of the belief that suppressing vulnerability and displaying masculine ideals is the pathway to acceptance. What I found most striking, however, was his account of his final year, when he was in charge of a dormitory of freshmen. In theory, the older students were meant to support the younger ones. In practice, this system of mentoring – which had the telling name of "fagging" or "skivvying" – was extremely patronizing. Pistorius recounts that if he had to stay up all night to study but risked falling asleep, he would simply call his

"skivvy" who would talk with him and help him shake off his sleepiness. Similarly, if Pistorius became hungry, his "skivvy" would bring him something to eat. Pistorius's endorsement of this system, as evidenced by his statement that "many schools no longer use the fagging system, […] [but] I think it is a fantastic way to mentor children" (Pistorius 2012: 75-76), confirms again he has assimilated Pretoria Boys High School's toxic culture of masculinity.

Turning now to the topic of prostheses, it is clear that they played a central role in Pistorius' life (and, consequently, his self-life narrative) since the beginning, when his parents made the decision to amputate his lower legs, as this would have assured him greater freedom and independence (Pistorius 2012: 20) and enabled him "to lead the most 'normal' life possible"[60] (Pistorius 2012: 16). The surgery was performed when he was eleven months old, and, six months later, he received his first pair of prostheses, which were made of plaster and mesh and enveloped in flesh-coloured lycra. For him, this marked a turning point. Indeed, he says that "from that day onwards I became invincible […] I believe that it was at this time in my life that my personality was shaped, and that my family was instrumental in laying the foundation stones of my competitive nature and of the man that I am today" (Pistorius 2012: 20-21). I found particularly remarkable his use of the adjective "invincible" and how he explicitly links his prostheses to the formation of his competitiveness, alongside his recognition of the role his parents had in shaping his character. Pistorius then proceeds by saying that his prostheses are what distinguished his childhood from his siblings', requiring constant maintenance and frequent replacement as he outgrew them. Indeed, using prosthetics of the wrong size entailed several risks, such as the development of sores and blisters at the point of contact, which could worsen to the point of requiring more amputation. These were more likely for bilateral amputees like him, as the entire body weight rests on the stumps. Moreover, the considerable heaviness of these prostheses further exacerbated these issues. Made of plaster and glass fibre with a wooden foot with a rubber sole, they could reach three kilograms each (Pistorius 2012: 31-32). Another collateral effect Pistorius suffered from was neurofibromatosis, a disorder of the nervous system caused by nervous endings attempting to grow but forming benign tumors due to the lack of space. These were not

[60] I would like to point out how this sentence is already significant in showing his tendency to reject his disability.

only extremely painful but also rendered his stumps hypersensitive, preventing him from wearing his prosthesis and forcing him to stay at home for months (Pistorius 2012: 31-32). I cannot refrain from wondering if not going outside for such a long time was also a choice dictated by his refusal to use a wheelchair, an undeniable symbol of disability.

However strange it might sound, prostheses were also the reason why running was Pistorius' "least favorite sport" (Pistorius 2012: 51). He recounts that, once a year, his primary school organized one day of athletics competitions and that he hated it, as the weight of his prostheses made it not only difficult but also painful for him to take part in it. This changed, however, when he was in secondary school and started to use a relatively short and hook-shaped pair of prosthetic limbs. These were handcrafted by a family friend, Chris Hatting, who started producing them at the end of 2001. Although they frequently broke as they were in the initial phases of development, these were much lighter than the ones he was used to, and he consequently began to enjoy long-distance running (Pistorius 2012: 79). These were the type of prostheses he was using in 2003, when he began sprinting as part of his rehabilitation process after the accident during the rugby match. Meanwhile, Chris Hatting had been recruited by an American company and helped develop a new type of prostheses made of carbon fibre: the Cheetahs. In June 2004, Hatting invited Pistorius to the USA to try them, and, from that moment, these technologically advanced prostheses specifically designed for sport became his running legs. Indeed, as he explains: "with the Cheetahs, which were about half the weight, athletics suddenly became fun and I began to think I might be able to achieve something" (Pistorius 2012: 90-91).

The issue with them began in 2007 when he was training for what he defines as "an entirely achievable goal" (Pistorius 2012: 135): qualifying for both the 2008 Beijing Olympic and the Paralympic Games. In fact, he claims that as his times were improving:

> People within the athletics world started to imply that my 'high tech' legs were somehow giving me an unfair advantage and needed to be handled with suspicion and more circumspection […] Suddenly my struggle to qualify for the Olympics had been transformed […] it became a contest about my very right to run and participate in the Olympics. (Pistorius 2012: 135).

The controversy developed further when, in March 2007, the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) introduced a rule that forbade any technical device that would give an advantage to the athlete who employed it. Because of how it was formulated and how quickly it was adopted, the press began to say that the rule had been

created specifically to impede Pistorius' participation alongside able-bodied athletes in international competitions. This led the IAAF to issue a statement clarifying that the rule was not aimed at him until tests that could establish whether his prostheses actually represented an advantage were carried out. This elucidation allowed him to take part in the Golden Gala event in Rome. Indeed, on 13th of July 2007, he competed in the 400-metre race, finishing second with a time of 46.90 and making history as the first "differently abled athlete"[61] who competed internationally with able-bodied runners (see Pistorius 2012: 136-138). The IAAF, however, proceeded with its intention to perform tests, which were scheduled for November 2007 (Pistorius 2012: 146). This marked the first time the IAAF or any other sports federation delved deeply into the question of prostheses, the use of which was entirely unregulated. These tests, conducted by a Professor Brüggemann, established that Pistorius' Cheetahs represented an unfair advantage over other athletes for distances greater than 400 meters. This was because not only could he run as fast as able-bodied individuals, but also his prostheses allowed him to lose less energy than that lost by the human limbs once he had reached his maximum speed (Pistorius 2012: 148-149).

The ways Pistorius talks about these findings offer particularly revealing insights. On the one hand, he rightly shifts the attention to his merits, thereby downplaying the role of the prostheses. As a matter of fact, he states that he has been using the same type of Blades since 2004, yet his times have gradually improved (Pistorius 2012: 189). Moreover, he claims that "carbon-fibre prostheses have been on the market for over ten years now and are commonly used by amputee athletes" (Pistorius 2012: 135) to highlight that it is his training and the honing of his technique that result in his athletic growth and not "some unfair advantage from technology" (Pistorius 2012: 189). On the other hand, he responds to it in more questionable ways. Firstly, he makes fair play – "a major trope of stereotypically gentlemanly attitude in sports discourse" (Parlati 2015: 97) – central to his narrative and *modus operandi*: "Had I believed that my Cheetahs provided any sort of technical advantage over the other athletes I would have retired from the competition myself. I valued the principles of fair competition and good sportsmanship above all

[61] The choice of this adjective is, in my opinion, particularly striking. Indeed, it not only appears to be another attempt on Pistorius' part to avoid self-identifying as disabled, but it also underscores his externality to the disability community's advocacy, which now widely rejects this term. The reason for this stance is that it is perceived as condescending and as a means to circumvent mentioning "disability", thereby reinforcing the idea that disability is inherently shameful (National Education Association n.d.).

others" (Pistorius 2012: 141). Second, he lists the disadvantages that his disability and his prostheses give him, often comparing his experience to those of able-bodied athletes. To begin, he states that "no athlete manages a perfect start at every race" (Pistorius 2012: 98), but for him it is particularly challenging as, not having feet, he cannot feel the blocks (Pistorius 2012: 98). Next, he points out that, even if no athlete likes to compete in heavy rain, for him it is even worse as the performance of his Cheetahs is compromised on a wet track. Subsequently, he claims that, with his prosthetic limbs, his knee joints are more distant from the ground, leading to greater interference in his perception of how the ends of the prostheses touch the surface. To conclude, he asserts that he can train only for a limited amount of time since the persistent rubbing of his stumps against his Cheetahs risks causing the formation of sores. Lastly, Pistorius also reports the support of Pietro Mennea, who leveraged the psychological dimension by highlighting that not being able to feel the track has repercussions on multiple levels, and concluded that (as conveyed by Pistorius) "if one takes […] [my] mental and physical preparation into account, along with the intense training and sacrifice necessary for me to achieve this level of competitive performance, one can only commend me as an example of pure athletics" (see Pistorius 2012: 142-145). While I recognize that Pistorius' reactions to the IAAF test results might simply be a way to defend himself, I find them problematic as they demonstrate his contradictory relationship to disability. On the one hand, he is always ready, as previously noted, to avoid self-identifying as disabled; on the other, he uses the downsides of his condition as a way to assert his right to be considered on the same level as able-bodied athletes. Similarly, reporting Mennea's opinion on him, which exploited the psychological aspect and depicted Pistorius as an almost inspirational figure precisely because of his disability, not only contradicts what Pistorius claimed about wanting to be considered "an athlete. Not a disabled athlete" (Pistorius 2012: 12) but undermines the efforts of the other Paralympians to be regarded on the same level as their Olympic counterparts.

Although I deem Pistorius' reactions to the IAAF test results questionable, I do not, however, contest the legitimacy of his decision to appeal against the IAAF's subsequent verdict before the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) in Lausanne, Switzerland, as his appeal was rooted in valid grounds. Indeed, the tests were incomplete as the data only accounted for the final phase of a 400-metre race, omitting the others.

Additionally, even if the Cheetahs entailed an advantage at the ankle-joint level, the tests did not consider the hip and knee joints. Lastly, the IAAF's decision banned him from competing with able-bodied individuals in any race, despite the report affirming that the technological advantage of his Cheetahs emerged only in the second half of a 400-metre race. The tests were, thus, repeated under the supervision of a team of internationally-known and respected scientists selected by Pistorius (see Pistorius 2012: 155-158). These led to "the definitive conclusion that in no way could my prostheses be considered as giving me a technical advantage over other athletes […] and show[ed] that my achievements were mine alone and dependent on my commitment, training and talent and not my prosthetic limbs" (Pistorius 2012: 160). On the basis of this new evidence, the CAS ruled in his favor. Yet, in his comment on this key moment, Pistorius once again succumbs to victimhood and the narrative of inspiration porn. In fact, he claims that it was "proven that the advantages of competing with prosthetic limbs outweighed the immense disadvantages of competing with those same prosthetic limbs" (Pistorius 2012: 165-166). Furthermore, he states that the CAS decision was fundamental because it highlighted not only that the times and achievements of amputated athletes who run using prostheses are due to their merit but also that they "display […] immense tenacity as they have each overcome the disadvantage of having to run with prostheses in the first place" (Pistorius 2012: 167).

In any case, the CAS decision allowed him to try to qualify for both the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, though he was unsuccessful (Pistorius 2012: 171), and for the 2012 London Olympics (Pistorius 2012: 186). While his autobiography was written before the outcome of his second attempt was known, it must be noted that he ultimately achieved this goal. Indeed, he secured a spot in the men's 400-meter race, where he reached the semifinals, and as a member of the 4 x 400-meter relay team, which made the finals (Lindstrom 2025). This does not mean, nevertheless, that he did not participate in the two corresponding editions of the Paralympics. While his successes in Beijing were covered earlier in this chapter, in London, he won the gold in the 400 meters and in the 4 x 100 relay, and the silver in the 200-meter race, competing as always in the T44 category (International Paralympic Committee n.d.a.). In his self-life narrative, Pistorius addresses the topic of participating in both the Olympic and the Paralympic Games. He explains that he perceives no issue with participating in the latter, but he sees no reason why he

should not be allowed to take part in the former as well if he is able to fulfill the time requirements (Pistorius 2012: 144). He states that, for him, the Olympics represent just a further athletic opportunity and, like any other athlete, he wants to participate in every available contest. While I could understand his perspective thus far, Pistorius contradicts himself again by asserting: "I do not consider the Paralympics to be inferior, merely different, and it remains incontestable that the Olympics are the ultimate sporting event" (Pistorius 2012: 104), thereby undermining the reasonable aspects of his dispute with the IAAF and the efforts of the Paralympic Movement to achieve the same recognition for both the Olympics and the Paralympics. To conclude this discourse, I want to report an emblematic quote which once more evidences Pistorius' rejection of his disability through his prosthetic legs, which, in turn, become a means to reaffirm his sporting masculinity:

> We are all equipped with so many more capacities that make it possible for us to transcend disability. People often ask me how it is that with artificial legs I can be qualified as anything but disabled. My answer is that, being far more able than they are in more than 90 per cent of sports, why should I be qualified as a disabled sportsman? It has been said that using prostheses is proof of disability, but I fail to see why this aspect of my persona should overshadow all my sporting ability. (Pistorius 2012: 120-121).

Beyond this toxic view of his prostheses, several other questionable aspects emerge from Pistorius' autobiography, each consistent with his refusal to identify as a disabled person. Firstly, he asserts his belief that everything depends on an individual's attitude to life and that everyone can choose either to consider the loss of the legs – a condition he tellingly refuses to label as "disability" – as a misfortune to be brooded over, or to embrace it and make the most out of it (Pistorius 2012: 119). Related to this, he states twice that individuals are seen by others in the same way they view themselves and that, since he is confident and positive, that is how others perceive him (Pistorius 2012: 26, 66). While an optimistic vision of life is fundamental, and a disabled person's attitude *can* influence their interactions, instances of ableism and discrimination are far more frequent, regardless of one's self-perception. By making such assertions, Pistorius oversimplifies this issue, neglecting the societal challenges inherent to living with a disability. The second debatable aspect is that he tattooed on his arm a passage from 1 Corinthians that says: "I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave" (Pistorius 2012: 192). In my opinion, this is particularly significant because, while not directly linked to his prostheses, it nonetheless underscores his toxic sporting stance and his intention to detach himself from a disability identity. This perspective, however, again overlooks the reality of most

disabled people who frequently navigate an extremely complex relationship with their body, especially since some conditions lead to physical responses being misaligned with the individual's intentions.

Ultimately, Pistorius' toxic masculinity culminated in the worst of outcomes when, on Valentine's Day in 2013, he killed his girlfriend, Reeva Steenkamp. Pistorius's version of what happened that night has always been that he had heard noises coming from behind the locked door of his bathroom. Thinking it was an intruder, he shot four times with his pistol and found out the victim was his girlfriend only after he had forced down the door with a cricket bat. However, the prosecution claimed that the athlete was aware that the person behind the door was Steenkamp and killed her in a rage, a thesis corroborated by the neighbors who reported hearing the two arguing (Watling 2024). A detail I found particularly striking about his trial is that, while Pistorius had always refused to self-identify as disabled, he promptly leveraged his disability during the process, as he did during the controversy over his participation in able-bodied events. Indeed, he removed his prostheses and walked around the court on his stumps to replicate the condition he was in when he shot Steenkamp. With his action, he and his lawyer, Mr. Roux, aimed to justify his violent reaction: "it is three o'clock in the morning, it is dark […] his balance is seriously compromised and… he would not be able to defend himself. He was anxious, he was frightened…" (Roux 2016 in BBC 2016). Even though it is precisely what he does, Mr. Roux also claimed: "I don't want to overplay vulnerability … I don't want to overplay disability … It doesn't mean because he's vulnerable that he can do what he likes. But please let's understand … who is this man that you must sentence? […] [he is] not a strong, ambitious man winning gold medals" (Roux 2016 in Burke 2016).

According to Ndopu (2013), the supercrip framework that had previously established him as a heroic character who overcame the obstacles on his path and achieved incredible sporting results served, after the killing of Steenkamp, to undermine his agency by depicting him as now finding himself involved in a tragic plot (Ndopu 2013 in Swartz 2013: 1158). I would suggest that his strategic portrayal of vulnerability (and appeal to pity) reinforces this narrative as well. Additionally, Ndopu (2013) argued that, in the media, agency was also displaced from Pistorius by placing him in a South African supposed "culture of violence". In this way, he became a collateral effect of a more serious

problem, shifting the attention away from the crime he committed (Ndopu 2013 in Swartz 2013: 1158). This perspective, which presented Pistorius's actions as a consequence of systemic violence, was also reinforced by Pistorius's father. When asked to comment on the fact that Pistorius's father, grandfather, and uncles owned a total of fifty-five guns between them, he answered that some are for hunting and others for protection, thereby leveraging two widespread beliefs: the first is that white South Africans are more likely to be victims of criminality than black South Africans, despite evidence indicating the opposite. The second, which also lacks proof, is that the primarily black African National Congress government incites violence against white people. This idea of Pistorius as a symptom of a larger, more serious issue was further reinforced by an issue of *Time* Magazine. Published in 2013 as a cover story, the article was tellingly titled "Man/Superman/Gunman" and sub-titled "Oscar Pistorius and South Africa's Culture of Violence" (Swartz 2013: 1157-1158). Furthermore, it was accompanied by an old photo of him "in a posture which carefully reproduced stereotypical features of hegemonic white masculinity while also, obviously, hinting at cyborg representation and potential" (Parlati 2015: 96).

Since the beginning of 2024, after nine years in prison, Pistorius is out on parole. Nevertheless, although twelve years have passed since the killing, the narrative around him is still problematic, as it diverts public attention from the gravity of Pistorius' crime and its victim, Reeva Steenkamp, by framing the killer as a regretful and rehabilitated individual. First, the focus is on his dating life – he is rumored to have a new girlfriend who strikingly resembles Steenkamp – and his uncle's multi-million-pound house, where he is "serving" the four years he has left of parole. Second, his parole conditions – he is not allowed to drink alcohol, handle guns, or visit nightclubs, and he must lead a low-profile life – are depicted as unusually strict, despite being standard for an individual on supervised release. Third, media spotlight is drawn to the fact that he has been volunteering at a local church and started a new charity, in addition to having begun to run again (in the mansion's tracks). Lastly, this portrayal of a rehabilitated individual is supported by a one-year-old picture of him, smiling shyly at the camera while formally dressed (Holt 2025).

To conclude, the analysis of Oscar Pistorius' autobiography reveals how his toxic masculinity was fostered by his family, especially his father, and his upbringing

environment, particularly his high school. Representing the tool to overcome his impairment and refuse to self-identify as disabled, prostheses, which played a central role in his life from childhood, further exacerbated this trait. This becomes particularly explicit when he describes the controversy surrounding his participation in able-bodied sporting events, where he nonetheless displays an ambiguous attitude, readily leveraging the disadvantages of his prosthetic limbs to support his position. His toxic masculinity culminated in Pistorius' killing of his girlfriend, Reeva Steenkamp, in 2013. During the trial, he once again strategically played on his supposed weakness. The contradictory combination of the "supercrip" narrative attributed to him and his vulnerable self-portrayal resulted in his agency in the crime being undermined, and even now, twelve years later, media attention continues to be shifted from what he committed towards portraying him as a redeemed figure.

To briefly recapitulate, in this chapter, I established that Paralympic athletes' unique and ambiguous status is reflected also in their self-life narratives belonging to both the "somebody" and "some body" memoirs categories. In fact, *Seize the Day* (2001), *In My Dreams I Dance* (2024), and *Blade Runner* (2012) equally exhibit characteristics of each of the two, which leads me to contend that this is likely to apply to all texts that fall within this genre. Second, I showed that these autobiographies are examples of "new disability memoirs", as their authors, to varying extents, display disability consciousness by reclaiming their conditions and their bodies exactly how they are and by being aware of ableism and, thus, by performing activism. Third, I pointed out several recurring elements in how the three athletes relate their experiences with sport. Further studies could look into more self-life writings by Paralympians to confirm if a discernible and consistent pattern can be identified. Lastly, I demonstrated the importance of adopting an intersectional approach, including in literary analysis, as race, gender, and technology all had a major impact on Grey-Thompson, Wafula Strike, and Pistorius's experiences as individuals with disabilities and Paralympians. The most important aspect that emerged is that, contrary to Grey-Thompson and Wafula Strike, for Oscar Pistorius, sport (together with his prostheses) is the means to overcompensate and reject his impairment, an attitude that is also the result of problematic ideals related to gender. Although Pistorius is the most emblematic case of the interplay of sport, technology, and toxic masculinity, further research could investigate if other Paralympic male athletes exhibit similar tendencies

(even if with hopefully less disturbing outcomes). Furthermore, what could be explored is if, in which circumstances, and through which ways, female athletes with disabilities try to overcome and deny their impairments. Lastly, it would be interesting to further examine the impact of race on the experience of male Paralympians.

References

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Grey-Thompson, T. *Seize the Day: My Autobiography*. United Kingdom: Hodder and Stoughton, 2001.

Pistorius, O. *Blade Runner (reprint ed.)*. United Kingdom: Virgin, 2012.

Wafula Strike, A. *In My Dreams I Dance (2nd ed.)*. United Kingdom: HarperCollins, 2024 (revised edition, with original content from 2010).

Secondary Sources

Adams, L. "Almost Famous: The Rise of the 'Nobody' Memoir". *The Washington Monthly*, April 2002.

Barker, C. and S. Murray, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Disability*. Cambridge University Press, 2018.

Barker, C. and S. Murray. "Chronology of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies". In *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Disability*, edited by C. Barker and S. Murray. Cambridge University Press, 2018, pp. xiii-xxi.

Barker, C. and S. Murray. "Introduction: On Reading Disability in Literature". In *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Disability*, edited by C. Barker and S. Murray. Cambridge University Press, 2018, pp. 1-13.

Barnes, C. and G. Mercer, eds., *Exploring the Divide: Illness and Disability*. The Disability Press, 1996.

Beacom, A. and I. Brittain, eds., *The Palgrave Handbook of Paralympic Studies*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

Beressem, H. et al., eds., *Culture – Theory – Disability: Encounters between Disability Studies and Cultural Studies*. Transcript Verlag, 2017.

Bérubé, M. "Foreword: Side Shows and Back Bends". In *Bending Over Backwards*, edited by L. J. Davis. NYU Press, 2002, pp. vii-xii.

Brittan, I. "Key Points in the History and Development of the Paralympic Games". In *The Palgrave Handbook of Paralympic Studies*, edited by A. Beacom and I. Brittain. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, pp. 125-149.

Couser, G. T. "Disability, Life Narrative, and Representation". In *The Disability Studies Reader*, edited by L. J. Davis. Routledge, 2013, pp. 456-459.

Couser, G. T. "Signifying Selves: Disability and Life Writing". In *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Disability*, edited by C. Barker and S. Murray. Cambridge University Press, 2018, pp. 199-211.

Couser, G. T. *Signifying Bodies: Disability in Contemporary Life Writing*. The University of Michigan Press, 2009.

Davis, L. J. "Introduction: Disability, Normality, and Power". In *The Disability Studies Reader (4th ed.)*, edited by L. J. Davis. Routledge, 2013, pp. 1-14.

Davis, L. J. *Bending Over Backwards*. NYU Press, 2002.

Davis, L. J. *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body*. Verso, 1995.

Davis, L. J., eds. *The Disability Studies Reader (4th ed.).* Routledge, 2013.

Dean, A. et al. 2022. "Gender Parity, False Starts, and Promising Practices in the Paralympic Movement." *Sociology of Sport Journal* 39 (3): 221-230.

DePauw, K. 1999. "Girls and Women with Disabilities in Sport." *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance* 70 (4): 50-52.

Federici, E. and M. Parlati, eds., *The Body Metaphor: Cultural Images, Literary Perceptions, Linguistic Representations*. Morlacchi, 2018

Federici, E. and M. Parlati. "Introduction". In *The Body Metaphor: Cultural Images, Literary Perceptions, Linguistic Representations*, edited by E. Federici and M. Parlati. Morlacchi, 2018, pp. 7-15.

Forber-Pratt, A. J. "Multiple Oppression and Tackling Stigma Through Sport". In *The Palgrave Handbook of Paralympic Studies*, edited by A. Beacom and I. Brittain. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, pp. 35-53.

Garland-Thomson, R. *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. Columbia University Press, 1997.

Hall, A. *Literature and Disability*. Routledge, 2016.

Kafer, A. and E. Kim. "Disability and the Edges of Intersectionality". In *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Disability*, edited by C. Barker and S. Murray. Cambridge University Press, 2018, pp. 123-138.

Legg, D. "Development of the IPC and Relations with the IOC and Other Stakeholders". In *The Palgrave Handbook of Paralympic Studies*, edited by A. Beacom and I. Brittain. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, pp. 151-172.

Lionnet, F. *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture*. Cornell University Press, 1989.

Mintz, S. B. *Unruly Bodies: Life Writing by Women with Disabilities*. The University of North Carolina Press, 2007.

Mitchell, D. and S. Snyder. *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*. The University of Michigan Press, 2000.

Ogoura, K. 2022. “The Olympics, Paralympics, and Gender: Participation of Female Athletes and the Principle of an Inclusive Society.” *Journal of Paralympic Research Group* 17: 115-136.

Parlati, M. 2015. “Controversial Embodiment: Sport, Masculinity, Dis/Ability.” *Altre Modernità* 14 (11): 90-100.

Schalk, S. “Disability and Women’s Writing”. In *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Disability*, edited by C. Barker and S. Murray. Cambridge University Press, 2018, pp. 170-184.

Shakespeare, T. “Disability, Identity and Difference”. In *Exploring the Divide: Illness and Disability*, edited by C. Barnes and G. Mercer. The Disability Press, 1996, pp. 94-113.

Shakespeare, T. “The Social Model of Disability”. In *The Disability Studies Reader*, edited by L. J. Davis. Routledge, 2013, pp. 214-221.

Shakespeare, T. *Disability Rights and Wrongs*. Routledge, 2006.

Smith, S. 1993. “Who’s Talking/Who’s Talking Back? The Subject of Personal Narratives.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 18 (2): 392-407.

Smith, S. and J. Watson. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. University of Minnesota Press, 2001.

Swartz, L. 2013. “Oscar Pistorius and the Melancholy of Intersectionality.” *Disability & Society* 28 (8): 1157-1161.

Waldschmidt, A. “Disability Goes Cultural: The Cultural Model of Disability as an Analytical Tool”. In *Culture – Theory – Disability: Encounters between Disability Studies and Cultural Studies*, edited by H. Beressem et al. Transcript Verlag, 2017, pp. 19-27.

Wolbring, G. “Prostheses and Other Equipment: The Issue of the Cyborg Athlete – Interrogating the Media Coverage of the Cybathlon 2016 Event”. In *The Palgrave Handbook of Paralympic Studies*, edited by A. Beacom and I. Brittain. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, pp. 439-459.

Sitography

AMP Media. 2024. “Stoke Mandeville Games, 1948-1959: The arrival of pioneer Paralympic women.” *International Paralympic Committee*, January 23. Accessed May 29, 2025. https://www.paralympic.org/feature/stoke-mandeville-games-1948-1959-arrival-pioneer-paralympic-women

BBC. 2016. “Pistorius walks on stumps to show court his disability.” Accessed July 05, 2025. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-36537518

Burke, J. 2016. “Oscar Pistorius removes prosthetic legs to walk at sentencing hearing.” *The Guardian*, June 15. Accessed July 05, 2025.

https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/15/oscar-pistorius-removes-prosthetic-legs-walk-sentencing-hearing

Holt, E. 2025. “Oscar Pistorius' new life 12 years to the day after blasting his lover to death: How Blade Runner has a Reeva Steenkamp-lookalike girlfriend and lives in plush mansion while 'trying to get back in shape' after jail release.” *Daily Mail*, February 14. Accessed July 05, 2025. https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14397525/Oscar-Pistorius-new-life-Reeva-Steenkamp-lookalike-girlfriend-mansion-jail-release.html

International Olympic Committee. n.d. “Mr Andrew Parsons.” Accessed May 17, 2025. https://www.olympics.com/ioc/mr-andrew-parsons

International Paralympic Committee. 2022. “Record number of female Para athletes set for Beijing 2022 Paralympic Winter Games.” Accessed June 01, 2025. https://www.paralympic.org/feature/record-number-female-para-athletes-set-beijing-2022-paralympic-winter-games

International Paralympic Committee. 2023. “Paralympic Flame to be created at Stoke Mandeville for all future Paralympic Games.” Accessed May 15, 2025. https://www.paralympic.org/news/paralympic-flame-be-created-stoke-mandeville-all-future-paralympic-games

International Paralympic Committee. n.d.a. “Oscar Pistorius.” Accessed July 04, 2025 https://www.paralympic.org/oscar-pistorius

International Paralympic Committee. n.d.b. “Paralympics History.” Accessed May 12, 2025. https://www.paralympic.org/ipc/history

International Paralympic Committee. n.d.c. “The Agitos Logo – Paralympic Symbol.” Accessed May 12, 2025. https://www.paralympic.org/logo

International Paralympic Committee. n.d.d. “World Para Athletics Classification.” Accessed June 01, 2025. https://www.paralympic.org/athletics/classification

Lewis, P. 2020. “Disability Discrimination Act: 1995 and now.” *House of Lords Library*, November 06. Accessed February 20, 2025. https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/disability-discrimination-act-1995-and-now/

Lindstrom, S. 2025. “Oscar Pistorius.” *Britannica*, April 25. Accessed July 04, 2025. https://www.britannica.com/biography/Oscar-Pistorius

Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary. n.d. “Normal.” Accessed November 22, 2024. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/normal.

National Education Association. n.d. “Words Matter! Disability Language Etiquette.” Accessed July 04, 2025. https://www.nea.org/words-matter-disability-language-etiquette

National Paralympic Heritage Trust. n.d. “Lillehammer 1994 Paralympic Winter Games.” Accessed May 16, 2025. https://www.paralympicheritage.org.uk/lillehammer-1994-paralympic-winter-games

Oxford English Dictionary. 2025a. “Mean (n.3), sense II.10.a.” Accessed August 14, 2025. https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1726826013

Oxford English Dictionary. 2025b. “Median (n.2), sense 3.” Accessed August 14, 2025.” https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/7965623981

Padovani, L. 2024. “Paris 2024 Paralympics | Record number of delegations, best percentage of women represented... another step towards parity.” *International Olympic Committee*, August 23. Accessed May 30, 2025. https://www.olympics.com/en/news/jeux-paralympiques-paris-2024-record-delegations-meilleur-pourcentage-de-femmes-representees-nouveau-pas-vers-parite.

Taylor, D. and D. Foggo. 2017. “Tanni Grey-Thompson’s husband accused over rival’s reclassification.” *The Guardian*, November 3. Accessed July 03, 2025 https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2017/nov/03/tanni-grey-thompson-husband-anne-wafula-strike-reclassification

Watling, T. 2024. “What Happened on the Day Oscar Pistorius Killed Reeva Steenkamp?” *Independent*, January 04. Accessed July 05, 2025. https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/oscar-pistorius-reeva-steenkamp-murder-b2473327.html

Welsh Athletics. n.d. “Tanni Grey-Thompson.” Accessed June 28, 2025. https://www.welshathletics.org/en/page/tanni-grey-thompson

Videography

Bonhôte, I. and P. Ettedgui. Rising Phoenix. Netflix. 1hr., 46 min. https://www.netflix.com/title/81122408

Poyart, A. Biônicos. Netflix. 1hr., 50 min. https://www.netflix.com/title/81406459

Riassunto

Per comprendere appieno il concetto di disabilità, è necessario analizzare quello di normalità. Quest'ultimo si sviluppò dopo l'industrializzazione grazie alla statistica, in particolare con il lavoro di Adolphe Quetelet che elaborò la nozione di "uomo medio". L'idea fu ripresa e approfondita dall'eugenetica: figura chiave fu Sir. Frances Galton che elaborò ulteriormente il concetto di Quetelet, introducendo l'idea che, dei due estremi del concetto dell'uomo medio, uno fosse preferibile all'altro. Questo approccio teorico ebbe conseguenze terribili sulle persone con disabilità, viste non solo come devianti dalla norma, ma portatrici di tratti indesiderabili. Questo portò al loro progressivo controllo, per esempio attraverso la sterilizzazione, per impedire la trasmissione di certe condizioni genetiche. Questo contesto sfociò nella nascita del "modello medico-individuale" della disabilità, basato sull'idea che la disabilità sia un problema intrinseco all'individuo, causato dalla sua diversità fisica, e che debba essere curata. Il potere decisionale è, quindi, nelle mani dei professionisti, senza il coinvolgimento delle persone interessate.

Nonostante ciò, si è progressivamente affermata una nuova consapevolezza sull'impatto che il contesto e l'ambiente hanno sugli individui con disabilità. Questa tendenza ha portato all'affermazione del "modello sociale". Sviluppato all'inizio degli anni Settanta dall'UPIAS (*Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation*), si basa sulla distinzione tra *impairment* (la dimensione individuale e privata della condizione in sé per sé) e disabilità (la dimensione pubblica dell'esclusione sociale) e sull'idea che sia la disabilità, non l'*impairment*, a costituire il problema. Questo approccio ha avuto dei risvolti positivi, come la formulazione di una strategia politica incentrata sulla rimozione degli ostacoli e la lotta per i diritti civili, un impatto psicologico positivo sulle persone con disabilità e l'emersione dei *disability studies* come disciplina accademica. Negli ultimi anni, però, questo modello ha ricevuto numerose critiche. In particolare, è stato contestato il fatto che non prenda in considerazione l'effetto che la condizione in sé per sé ha sull'individuo, che non sia sempre semplice distinguere tra *impairment* e disabilità, e che ci siano delle difficoltà pratiche e insormontabili nell'eliminazione di tutte le barriere e nella realizzazione dell'*Universal Design*. Queste obiezioni hanno portato all'elaborazione di due nuovi approcci. Il primo, formulato da Tom Shakespeare (2006), è il "modello intersezionale" che concepisce la disabilità come il risultato dell'intersezione di fattori individuali e sociali. Il secondo, è il "modello culturale" di

Anne Waldschmidt (2017) e sostiene che la disabilità sia una costruzione non solo sociale ma anche culturale e che esista solo quando un'"anormalità" è considerata rilevante in un determinato contesto storico.

Davis (2002), invece, ha proposto non solo lo smantellamento del concetto di "disabilità" come categoria ma anche il suo utilizzo per mettere in discussione l'idea stessa di gruppo identitario. Egli evidenzia come la nozione di "disabilità" sia concettualmente instabile. Infatti, non può essere considerata come una categoria unitaria, dato che si basa sulle variazioni del corpo umano e include un elevato numero di condizioni e di individui, per di più estremamente diversi fra loro. Allo stesso modo in cui l'eterogeneità della disabilità ne compromette la coerenza come categoria, l'esistenza di molteplici identità indebolisce il concetto di identità in sé. È proprio questa instabilità intrinseca della disabilità a mettere in luce, secondo Davis (2002), tale fenomeno. Questa consapevolezza porta all'emergere di una nuova fase, il "Dismodernismo", che si fonda sull'idea che ciò che accomuna gli esseri umani sia proprio la diversità e che ogni gruppo, in base a certe caratteristiche, sia marginalizzato dal sistema. In questa prospettiva, il soggetto dismodernista è incompleto e può trovare compimento solo attraverso la tecnologia. L'*impairment* è lo standard, mentre la normalità viene considerata un'illusione. Questo dà origine anche ad una nuova etica del corpo.

Questi approcci alla disabilità sono stati teorizzati e discussi nell'ambito dei *disability studies*, una disciplina accademica emersa negli anni Settanta in seguito alle lotte per i diritti civili. Inizialmente focalizzata sulle scienze politiche e sulla sociologia, a partire dalla fine degli anni Novanta si è estesa anche alle materie umanistiche, concentrandosi sull'analisi della disabilità in storia e in letteratura, con l'obiettivo di evidenziare stereotipi e discriminazione e ridefinire la disabilità come un'identità collettiva e positiva. Dall'inizio del nuovo millennio, questo campo di studi è entrato in una nuova fase, caratterizzata dal dibattito acceso su alcuni temi centrali, che sta portando gli accademici a cercare nuovi modi per teorizzare la disabilità. Un esempio è lo sviluppo di una sotto-disciplina, i *critical disability studies*, basata su una concezione della disabilità più sfaccettata e complessa. È fondamentale anche considerare che i *disability studies* hanno seguito un percorso di formazione analogo a quello di altri campi accademici, come gli studi di genere e gli studi afroamericani, emersi anch'essi dalle lotte per i diritti civili. Questo evidenzia l'importanza di adottare un approccio intersezionale,

ovvero una prospettiva che analizza come le diverse identità e categorie interagiscono tra loro. Nel caso specifico di questa tesi, significa fare ricerca su come l'esperienza di una persona con disabilità cambi a seconda dell'etnia, del genere, della provenienza, etc. e come ciò si rifletta in diversi livelli di inclusione. Inoltre, vuol dire focalizzarsi sul sistema che crea e mantiene le categorie dominanti e mettere in discussione i *disability studies*, prendendo le distanze dall'universalismo che li caratterizza e, paradossalmente, concentrandosi sulle esperienze di disabilità specifiche in vari determinati contesti culturali. Tra le varie discipline che possono essere combinate con i *disability studies* assumono particolare rilevanza gli studi di genere, gli studi queer e gli studi postcoloniali.

Un'altra prospettiva intersezionale di cui tenere conto è quella tra la disabilità e la letteratura. Avviato da Lennard Davis (1995) e Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (1997), questo approccio consiste nell'applicare le chiavi di lettura degli studi letterali e culturali alle rappresentazioni della disabilità. Quello che emerge è che la disabilità è una presenza costante nei testi, un fenomeno che si spiega con la necessità di narrare ciò che è difficile da comprendere. Tuttavia, passa spesso inosservata poiché al corpo viene associato un giudizio di valore che gli attribuisce un significato particolare. Questo porta alla conclusione che la disabilità viene impiegata principalmente come metafora. Nel 2000, David Mitchell e Sharon Snyder, con la loro teoria della *narrative prosthesis*, hanno spiegato che essa è usata tradizionalmente per rappresentare ciò che resiste agli sforzi della società di imporre la "normalità". Questo veicola l'idea che la distruzione delle norme corporee equivalga a una compromissione della sfera morale. Mitchell e Snyder hanno inoltre evidenziato come il corpo disabile sia usato metaforicamente per consentire al testo e ai suoi concetti astratti di ancorarsi alla materialità e di entrare, quindi, nel mondo tangibile. Il problema è che questo lega il corpo ad un sistema limitato di significati simbolici che lo posizionano in opposizione al corpo "sano". La teoria della *narrative prosthesis* è stata a sua volta oggetto di critiche, in particolare per il fatto che, mentre l'obiettivo di Mitchell e Snyder era quello di mettere in discussione l'uso della disabilità come metafora, loro stessi ricorrono a questa strategia per formulare la loro teoria e perché questa rinforza l'idea di "norma" presupponendo che la disabilità non sia mai rappresentata di per sé. Una seconda teoria riguardante la disabilità e la letteratura è quella dell'*aesthetic nervousness*, formulata nel 2007 da Ato Quayson. L'idea alla sua base è che, quando la disabilità è presente nei testi letterari, i modi tradizionali in cui le

storie e i personaggi sono raccontati sono messi in discussione, generando tensione su diversi piani. Per la sua elaborazione, Quayson ha tratto ispirazione da vari accademici. La prima è Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (1997) per quel che riguarda i motivi per cui le prime interazioni tra persone "normodotate" e con disabilità tendono a fallire. Il secondo è Lennard Davis (2002) per aver riconosciuto che il corpo con disabilità sia indispensabile al mantenimento del realismo di un romanzo. La terza fonte sono Mitchell e Snyder (2000) per la loro idea che la disabilità causi il collasso dei testi. L'ultima fonte è Mikhail Bakthin, a cui Quayson si ispira per la sua "struttura dell'interlocuzione scettica", fondata sul concetto che le rappresentazioni letterarie della disabilità sollevino dubbi su come questa sia percepita ed immaginata, contribuendo a creare *aesthetic nervousness*.

Il genere letterario a cui appartengono i testi al centro dell'analisi di questa tesi è l'autobiografia. Coniato durante l'Illuminismo, questo concetto è stato recentemente messo in discussione per la sua predilizione verso le narrazioni di persone in posizioni di potere, a scapito della varietà storica e geografica dei testi. Questo ha portato all'affermazione di *(self-)life writing* e *(self-)life narrative*, espressioni proposte da Watson and Smith (2001) perché considerate comprensive della varietà eterogenea di pratiche (auto-)referenziali. In questo contesto, Couser (2009) propone un'ulteriore distinzione per le (*self-)life narratives* incentrare sulla disabilità, partendo dalle definizioni di Lorraine Adams (2002) di *somebody memoir*, cioè quelle opere autobiografiche scritte da persone famose come conseguenza della loro notorietà, e di *nobody memoir*, cioè quei testi scritti da individui che diventano celebri proprio grazie alla pubblicazione del loro *self-life writing*. Notando come la maggior parte dei testi di quest'ultimo gruppo riguardino la disabilità, Couser sostiene che il *nobody memoir* è anche il memoir di *some body*, visto che spesso tratta cosa significhi essere, avere e vivere in o come un corpo particolare. Ad ogni modo, le caratteristiche principali delle *self-life narratives* sono: l'autore rappresenta sia il soggetto che l'oggetto della narrazione; il testo si fonda sul suo contesto culturale, geografico e temporale; il mondo a cui si fa riferimento è quello reale e c'è corrispondenza tra l'autore e il narratore. Quest'ultimo aspetto può diventare problematico quando la disabilità dello scrittore è un ostacolo al racconto della propria storia, rendendo necessario l'intervento di un collaboratore. In questi casi, il rischio è che quest'ultimo influenzi la narrazione. In merito al genere autobiografico, è cruciale considerare anche la questione della veridicità. Nonostante spesso si pensi,

erroneamente, che un'autobiografia consista in un insieme di fatti riguardanti una determinata persona, in realtà, essa rappresenta un'incorporazione di questi fatti nella verità soggettiva dell'autore. La verità autobiografica è, quindi, un patto tra narratore e lettore: il primo, con il proprio testo, afferma che la sua versione merita di essere accettata, mentre il secondo dà per scontata la validità dell'esperienza dell'autore.

Il primo testo autobiografico sulla disabilità in lingua inglese risale al 1754 e fu scritto da William Hay. Il diciannovesimo secolo vede la diffusione di testi scritti da persone che erano state istituzionalizzate o affette da disabilità cognitive, mentre l'inizio del ventesimo è caratterizzato dalla pubblicazione dei primi testi scritti da donne. Il genere si sviluppa ulteriormente dopo la Seconda guerra mondiale, grazie ai numerosi racconti dei veterani e quelli derivanti dal picco nei casi di polio. Il punto di svolta, però, occorre negli anni Ottanta e Novanta con il cosiddetto "memoir boom". In questo periodo, i testi riguardanti la disabilità proliferano come conseguenza del movimento per i diritti civili e del crescente interesse del resto della popolazione, che legge queste storie per cercare di comprendere la disabilità e di alleviare il proprio disagio e le proprie paure, ricevendo conferma delle proprie idee stereotipiche. Ecco perché questo genere letterario è cruciale per le persone con disabilità: perché permette loro di ribaltare la loro posizione minoritaria e di mettere in dubbio questi "copioni culturali". Il problema è che il contesto influenza anche gli stessi autori, che talvolta internalizzano e ricorrono a schemi narrativi convenzionali che rinforzano i pregiudizi e la marginalizzazione, limitando il potenziale sovversivo del genere. Questi sono la "retorica del trionfo", la "retorica gotica", la "retorica della compensazione spirituale" e la "retorica della nostalgia" e sono stati evidenziati da Couser (2009). Tuttavia, un numero crescente di opere, definite *new disability memoirs*, evidenzia un'evoluzione significativa, in un rapporto di causa-effetto reciproco con l'attivismo del movimento per i diritti civili. Anche in questi testi, ricorrono alcuni schemi narrativi. Il primo è la "retorica del coming out", che consiste nell'affermazione della propria identità di persona con disabilità e si articola in due fasi: l'accettazione privata e il riconoscimento pubblico di appartenere ad una minoranza, che sfocia anche all'attivismo. Il secondo è la "retorica dell'emancipazione", caratterizzata da un *coming out* in senso letterale, per esempio, attraverso la deistituzionalizzazione. L'idea alla base è la lotta contro le ingiustizie, il desiderio di libertà e l'abolizione di ogni forma di discriminazione. La consapevolezza dell'autore emerge dalla sua interazione

con chi si trova in una situazione simile ed è proprio questa identificazione che lo porta ad agire.

Dato che le tre autobiografie al centro di questa tesi sono state scritte da atleti con disabilità, è fondamentale anche analizzare il movimento paralimpico. Il suo fondatore fu il dottor Ludwig Guttmann, direttore del Centro di Lesioni Spinali di Stoke Mandeville, in Inghilterra, che ebbe l'intuizione di includere lo sport nel processo di riabilitazione e reintegrazione sociale dei veterani di guerra. Questo portò alla creazione dei Giochi di Stoke Mandeville, la cui prima edizione si tenne il 29 luglio 1948. Il loro continuo sviluppo nel decennio successivo culminò nella decisione di organizzare i Giochi del 1960 a Roma, nella stessa città e qualche settimana dopo le Olimpiadi, portando a quella che è considerata la prima edizione delle Paralimpiadi nella loro accezione odierna. I primi Giochi Paralimpici Invernali, invece, ebbero luogo nel 1976. Un ulteriore punto di svolta è stata la fondazione del Comitato Internazionale Paralimpico (IPC) nel settembre 1989, che ha fin da subito cooperato con il Comitato Internazionale Olimpico (IOC). Negli ultimi anni, tuttavia, è sorto un dibattito su un potenziale distaccamento dell'IPC dall'IOC e sull'organizzazione autonoma o sulla combinazione dei Giochi. A tal proposito, è importante notare che tentativi di integrazione sono già avvenuti quando le Olimpiadi Estive ed Invernali hanno ospitato due eventi paralimpici dimostrativi ciascuno tra il 1984 e il 2004 e quando atleti con disabilità hanno preso parte alle Olimpiadi, circostanza che ha causato ogni volta non poche controversie.

Il rapido sviluppo del movimento paralimpico non ha avuto lo stesso impatto su tutti gli atleti con disabilità e le donne continuano ad essere sottorappresentate in tutti i suoi aspetti. Tuttavia, si osserva un aumento progressivo del numero di atlete dal 1988, fino a raggiungere il 45% dei partecipanti a Parigi 2024. La situazione, al contrario, è meno incoraggiante per le Paralimpiadi Invernali dove, nelle ultime quattro edizioni, la partecipazione femminile non ha superato il 25%. Per un'analisi completa della questione, però, è necessario considerare altri due fattori, oltre alle percentuali generali e per ogni Comitato Paralimpico Nazionale (NPC): i singoli sport e le singole classi, ovvero i singoli gruppi di atleti con disabilità simili per tipologia e gravità. La principale ragione di questa disparità è che le donne subiscono una doppia discriminazione, data dall'intersezione tra stereotipi di genere e di disabilità. Per favorire una maggior partecipazione femminile l'IPC ha adottato diverse misure, come la creazione, nel 2003,

del *Women in Sport Committee* e la partnership con *Agitos Foundation* per collaborare in un progetto chiamato *WoMentoring*. Inoltre, ha aumentato i posti disponibili per le donne in diverse competizioni, aggiunto posti assegnabili a prescindere dal genere e stabilito che nuovi sport possono essere introdotti solo se c'è equilibrio tra i generi. Sebbene l'impatto di queste strategie vari a seconda del livello di sviluppo e del contesto nazionale di ogni NPC, ci sono misure che tutti i NPC possono adottare come il dare visibilità alle atlete donne e ai loro risultati, favorire la creazione di associazioni che promuovano la partecipazione nello sport e dedicarsi al reclutamento diretto.

Altro elemento cruciale dello sport paralimpico è la questione delle protesi. Esse sono tradizionalmente concettualizzate come degli strumenti per colmare una mancanza e "aggiustare" i corpi ritenuti instabili e malfunzionanti delle persone con disabilità. Benché le protesi si siano evolute per tutto il secolo scorso, fino a due decenni fa le loro prestazioni non si avvicinavano minimamente agli equivalenti umani. Questo sta cambiando: le persone disabili hanno ora accesso a strumenti che non solo "compensano" le loro "carenze fisiche" ma che le portano oltre i limiti della specie. Ciò ha un impatto anche sullo sport, dove le protesi stanno diventando una soluzione per migliorare le performance. Il problema è che c'è il rischio che diano un vantaggio ingiusto all'atleta che le porta e che diventino una "violazione di doping tecnologico". Ad ogni modo, bisogna essere consapevoli che il progresso tecnologico è tale che, in futuro, anche il miglior atleta olimpico potrebbe essere superato da uno paralimpico. Inoltre, anche le persone "normodotate" potrebbero ricorrere a strumenti di potenziamento, una tendenza che potrebbe essere accelerata anche proprio dai successi sportivi delle persone con disabilità. È esattamente questo scenario che viene immaginato nel film distopico *Biônicos* (2024). Tuttavia, competizioni incentrate sull'interazione tra sport e tecnologia sono già realtà. Ne è un esempio il *Cybathlon*, tenutosi a Zurigo nel 2016, dove persone con e senza disabilità si sono sfidate in sei discipline utilizzando dispositivi tecnologici integrati nel corpo.

Le autobiografie degli atleti paralimpici rappresentano un caso particolare, dato che possono essere classificate sia come *"somebody" memoirs*, in quanto scritte come conseguenza della notorietà dei loro autori, sia come *"some body" memoirs*, in quanto raccontano anche cosa significhi avere e vivere con un corpo ritenuto particolare. Infatti, i tre testi al centro di questa tesi – *Seize the Day* di Tanni Grey-Thompson (2001), *In My*

Dreams I Dance di Anne Wafula Strike (2024) e *Blade Runner* (2012) di Oscar Pistorius – presentano caratteristiche di entrambi. Per quel che riguarda gli elementi che tipici dei *"some body" memoirs*, tutti e tre gli autori cominciano spiegando la propria condizione, evidenziando l'impatto che questa ha sulla loro identità e rivendicando il proprio corpo. Tuttavia, tutti e tre esplicitano di averla accettata e rifiutano l'idea di dover essere "aggiustati", un atteggiamento rafforzato dall'importanza che attribuiscono al ricevere spiegazioni riguardo al loro *impairment* e dal sostegno dei loro genitori. Ciò non implica, però, che Grey-Thompson, Wafula Strike e Pistorius ignorino la dimensione sociale della disabilità. Nei loro testi, infatti, affrontano questioni di accessibilità ma anche forme di discriminazione più profonde. Wafula Strike e Pistorius, però, hanno anche interiorizzato l'abilismo, un aspetto che emerge dal loro atteggiamento ambiguo nei confronti della loro condizione. Quel che rende, invece, queste autobiografie dei *"somebody" memoirs* è il ruolo che lo sport riveste nelle vite degli autori e il loro essere atleti paralimpici. Particolare rilevanza è data al modo in cui si sono avvicinati all'attività sportiva e all'aspetto competitivo, parlando dei Giochi Paralimpici a cui hanno preso parte e soffermandosi specialmente sulle gare specifiche, i risultati ottenuti e le sensazioni provate. Inoltre, tutti e tre insistono sul fatto che gli atleti paralimpici debbano essere considerati allo stesso livello di quelli olimpici e dimostrano consapevolezza del loro status di celebrità. L'ultimo elemento da prendere in considerazione è che sia Grey-Thompson che Wafula Strike, nei loro testi, si dedicano all'attivismo.

Sia Grey-Thompson che Wafula Strike sono consce della doppia discriminazione che le atlete con disabilità subiscono. Grey-Thompson, in particolare, esamina i problemi specifici all'interno del movimento paralimpico. Oltre alla sfera sportiva, entrambe le autrici trattano anche il tema delle relazioni sentimentali. Ancora una volta, dal testo di Wafula Strike, emerge un'interiorizzazione dei pregiudizi, nello specifico quello che le donne con disabilità siano indesiderabili. Ciò nonostante, non solo sia lei che Grey-Thompson sfidano i loro stereotipi e quelli della società sposandosi, ma mettono in discussione anche i preconcetti di genere, sovvertendo i ruoli tradizionali. Inoltre, entrambe parlano di gravidanza, maternità e della possibilità di avere un bambino con disabilità, sebbene in modo diverso: mentre Grey-Thompson li menziona solo una volta, Wafula Strike torna sull'argomento in diverse occasioni, mostrando talvolta di aver interiorizzato l'abilismo. L'autobiografia di Wafula Strike introduce un'ulteriore

dimensione all'analisi, includendo anche la questione etnica nell'esperienza di un'atleta paralimpica. Il primo aspetto che tratta sono le diverse condizioni di vita in cui è cresciuta rispetto a quelle a cui le società occidentali sono abituate. Il secondo è, pur riconoscendo la forte influenza del Regno Unito, l'estraneità della popolazione keniota alle persone europee. L'ultimo è la sua scarsa familiarità con le sedie a rotelle. Le origini di Wafula Strike hanno avuto un impatto notevole anche sulla sua carriera sportiva, culminato nella sua riclassificazione in una categoria per atleti con disabilità meno gravi.

Oscar Pistorius, invece, rappresenta un caso particolare perché mette in dubbio la supposizione che la disabilità sia il contrario dell'ideale maschile, essendo lui disabile ed uomo. Tuttavia, Pistorius si è sempre rifiutato di essere considerato disabile e sono proprio le sue protesi che gli hanno permesso di farlo e di conformarsi agli ideali di mascolinità tossica. Questa è stata alimentata anche dalla sua famiglia, in particolare da suo padre, e dall'ambiente in cui è cresciuto, specialmente dalla scuola superiore che ha frequentato. Ciò nonostante, le protesi sono state l'elemento più determinante, rivestendo un ruolo cruciale nella sua vita fin dall'infanzia. Nel 2004, comincia ad utilizzare le cosiddette "Cheetahs", protesi tecnologicamente avanzate specifiche per correre. Sono queste che finiscono al centro del dibattito, a causa della convinzione che gli diano un vantaggio rispetto agli altri atleti. L'atteggiamento che Pistorius assume nel parlare di questa controversia, tuttavia, è problematico, in quanto si rivela subito propenso a sottolineare gli svantaggi della sua disabilità per confutare le accuse. Ad ogni modo, il Tribunale Arbitrale dello Sport stabilì che queste erano infondate, consentendogli di provare a qualificarsi per i Giochi Olimpici di Pechino e Londra e di consolidare il suo rifiuto della propria disabilità, la sua considerazione delle protesi come mezzo per superarla e la sua relazione problematica con il proprio corpo. La mascolinità tossica di Pistorius ha raggiunto il suo apice quando, il 14 febbraio 2013, ha ucciso la sua fidanzata. Anche durante il processo, Pistorius ha utilizzato la sua disabilità a proprio vantaggio, sostenendo che in quel momento specifico si trovasse in una posizione di vulnerabilità. Questo e la narrativa del *supercrip* che si è creata intorno a lui nel corso degli anni hanno portato i media a sminuire la sua responsabilità nell'omicidio, dipingendolo, inoltre, come un effetto collaterale della "cultura della violenza" sudafricana. Dodici anni dopo, la narrazione mediatica della sua vita in libertà vigilata continua ad essere ancora problematica perché lo rappresenta come un individuo pentito e riabilitato.

In conclusione, attraverso un'analisi via via più focalizzata, da questa tesi è emerso come gli atleti paralimpici ricoprano una posizione ambigua per il loro essere disabili e sportivi di alto livello, una situazione che si riflette nel fatto che le loro autobiografie siano sia *"somebody"* che *"some body" memoirs*. Inoltre, *Seize the Day*, *In My Dreams I Dance* e *Blade Runner* sono esempi di *new disability memoirs* in quanto i loro autori, in misura variabile, manifestano consapevolezza della disabilità, rivendicando la loro condizione e il loro corpo, riconoscendo l'abilismo e, di conseguenza, facendo attivismo. Questi elementi in comune suggeriscono anche l'esistenza di un possibile schema narrativo. Infine, è stata dimostrata l'importanza di adottare un approccio intersezionale nella ricerca sulla disabilità che, nel caso specifico, ha preso in considerazione l'etnia, il genere e la tecnologia.